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A BORN COQUETTE.



A  
BORN COQUETTE

BY  
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'MOLLY BAWN,' 'PHYLLIS,' 'LADY BRANKSMERE,' 'THE DUCHESS,' ETC.

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# A BORN COQUETTE.



## CHAPTER I.

Women with tongues,  
Like polar needles, ever on the jar.'

NO sun greets the coming of the next morning. 'But at all events no rain either,' says Nan to herself joyously, as she springs out of bed and runs to the window. The sky is all a sullen gray, and a soft low curious wind, that sounds as though it were purposely suppressing itself, rushes through the woods and shrubberies. It is a decidedly unlovely day, but still one not altogether hopeless; there are touches about it, little gleaming lights now and again, that suggest to the braver-hearted the idea that it may, later on, grow into a glorious afternoon.

Almost directly after breakfast Fred Croker, who is to escort Penelope and Gladys to their aunt's picnic (Bartle, for some reason unexplained, not being considered a sufficient chaperon), arrives at Rathmore, and on his very heels the aunt herself—so swiftly, indeed, that Penelope has not enough time given her to smuggle him out of the drawing-room before Mrs. Manly's head is round the door. It would have been better, perhaps, if he had stood his ground, as a flying coat-tail has ever something about it calculated to rouse the ire of our parents and guardians.

‘Who was that?’ demands Julia in a loud and severe tone.

She is always specially down on ‘philandering,’ as she is pleased to call it, and to-day, happening to be put out by the unpropitious look of the sky and her consequent fears for the new bonnet she is bent on wearing, her temper is not by any means as sweet as she believes it.

‘Only Fred,’ says Penelope meekly, finding further evasion useless, and turning a confused and very red face to her aunt.

‘What is he running away for? Is he ashamed of

himself?' asks Mrs. Manly, not, it must be confessed, without reason. 'Anyone might imagine he had come for the spoons. Good heavens! what conduct! And what brings him here at this hour, may I ask?'

'He came—he brought—it was a message for me,' stammers Penelope.

'Then why couldn't he stand and deliver it, like a gentleman,' prosecutes Julia sternly. 'Am I an ogre, or are you telling the truth? There was something about his coat-tails that, in my opinion, savoured strongly of guilt! Any message might have been delivered at the Galley Head, where I believe I was mad enough to ask him to join us. I tell you plainly, Penelope, that I don't like that young man. He is sly, underhand; I'm sure the way you and he went on last Thursday evening at my house was enough to horrify any well-regulated mind.'

'Oh, Julia, what did I do?' cries poor Penelope miserably.

'Everything!' with a sweep of her right arm. 'Such whispering in the corridors, such flirting all over the place, such *cuggera-muggera* in every corner!'

This last awful accusation finishes Penelope. Being ignorant of its meaning, she goes down before it mentally and physically. Sinking into an arm-chair, she turns eyes full of despairing tears upon Miss Delaney, who has just entered the room.

‘Such what?’ cries Nan, stopping short as if struck with sudden amazement.

Into her tone she has thrown an accent of the very wildest curiosity.

‘Cuggera-muggera,’ persists Julia valiantly, whilst reddening perceptibly. The word is one that had been dear to the plebeian Manly, and she is now sorry she has used it; but to strike her colours to Nan, of whom she is the least bit in the world afraid, is not to be thought of for a moment. ‘And a most expressive word too. I decline to alter it.’

‘Any particular language?’ pursues Nan briskly. ‘Hindustanee, eh? It struck me as being a little——’

‘Any language you like,’ says Mrs. Manly, with a sniff.

‘I wish you would write it down,’ says Nan, with increasing affability. ‘One might forget it—though



I hardly think it possible—still, better always be on the safe side. A new word, and one so expressive, as you say, is always interesting.’

‘Not so interesting, however, as the subject that called it forth,’ says Mrs. Manly tartly. ‘I was just telling Penelope that I——’

‘What a perfect bonnet, Julia!’ interrupts Nan rapturously. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘You like it really? Think it becoming?’ says Julia, forgetting her anger instantly. She smiles and bridles a little, and nods her plumed head. ‘But what of the day, my dear girl? very unpromising I call it; and you know even the mildest damp is fatal to feathers.’

‘Better wear another, then.’

‘But I have asked the Brownings, and you know Cecilia never goes anywhere in her second-best things. It is really too provoking that to-day of all days should be so uncertain. If it was a regular downpour one could make up one’s mind to it; but as it is, of course, I shall be expected to be at my post, and that will mean ruin to my bonnet.’

‘It may keep up,’ says Nan, glancing out of the

window at the dark sullen day. 'For my own sake I hope it as much as for yours. A wet day on the water is a miserable thing.'

'*What* water? Are you not coming with me?' asks Julia sharply.

'No,' says Nan.

'Then where you going?' more sharply still.

'Guess,' says Nan, who never can resist a chance to tease.

'So that is why Boyle is not coming either,' exclaims Julia, growing terribly irate. 'Now, once for all, Nan, let me tell you, I will not have any nonsense in that direction. It is in my power to make or mar Boyle, and I have already arranged a marriage for him. You have no money, neither has he, and, besides, I consider a union between first cousins absolutely sinful.'

'You ought to go into Parliament and set right that abuse,' says Nan.

'Where are you going to-day with Boyle?' demands her aunt indignantly.

'Where do you think?' gaily.

'Answer me, Nan.'

‘You would never guess it,’ persists Nan, clasping her hands behind her back and shrugging her shoulders with a little provoking air. ‘To the most delightful place in the world, because the most inaccessible. A place you have never seen yet, Julia—you, with all your experience. Come, one little guess. No? Well, ask me again, prettily, the name of it, and perhaps I’ll tell you.’

‘Where, then?’ asks Mrs. Manly wrathfully.

‘Nowhere,’ declares Miss Delaney, with a little burst of rippling laughter. ‘Oh, silly Julia, not to guess that; Mr. Hume, not Boyle, is to be my squire to-day.’

‘Mr. Hume?’ All Julia’s wrath fades into space. Her face grows radiant. ‘You don’t say so!’ she says, leaning back in her chair, and settling her flounces with all the air of one prepared to hear, and receive graciously, a confidence. ‘Sailing, of course. Oh, my dear girl, what a blessing it is to be a rich man, able to keep a yacht—able to keep—er—well, everything.’

‘Even a wife,’ says Nan audaciously, who sees through her as easily as though she were made of glass.

‘Just so, just so,’ says the astute Julia, suppressing any little chagrin she may be feeling. She grows even bold beneath the satisfaction she is feeling. ‘And why shouldn’t you be that wife?’ she says, oh, so artlessly.

‘There is no law against it, I believe,’ says Miss Delaney meditatively.

‘Not one, not one,’ says Julia enthusiastically.

She is hardly aware of the absurdity of her reply until a little mocking laugh from Nan enlightens her.

‘Law or no law,’ cries that young lady promptly, ‘he’ll get no wife in me.’

‘That is what girls always say before a man has proposed,’ says Mrs. Manly. ‘And,’ solemnly, ‘I’m not sure, but it is the *best* thing to say. If he chances to hear it, it makes him doubly determined to have his own way—all men being despots at heart—and if he does *not* hear it, why, no harm done.’

‘You are completely thrown away down here, Julia,’ says Nan. ‘You should go and mix in the big world of politics. Such consummate knowledge of human nature, such diplomatic powers as you possess, would lift you to the highest rung of the ladder in no time.’



‘Your poor dear Uncle Manly often said the same,’ acknowledges Julia modestly. ‘But never mind me. Dearest girl, let us think of something else, which, if less important, is, at all events, full of interest, namely, your chances with Mr. Hume.’

Here Nan makes a little irrepressible movement—a dangerous movement. It is as though she is about to rise and fall upon, and slay her enemy, but she suppresses herself.

‘It would be an admirable marriage,’ goes on Julia, in her usual pottering style. ‘A while since I spoke to you rather sharply about your little flirtation with Boyle, but boys will be boys, and girls girls, to the end of time, and er——’

These incontrovertible facts proving a little too much for her, she grows slightly fogged, and pauses to cough vigorously with a view to collecting herself.

‘I can see,’ she goes on presently, ‘that I wronged your common-sense (inherited from me) when I accused you of harbouring even the most distant intention of wedding with Boyle. My dear Nan, you must pardon that. Boyle is, in one sense, a beggar ; Mr. Hume is all that any young woman could possibly

desire—a most excellent *parti*, a thorough good match.’

‘I don’t consider him a good match,’ says Nan, coldly, decisively.

‘Such talk is folly,’ says Mrs. Manly, with irritation. ‘Are you looking for a Duke, or blood-royal? I can’t see what you can possibly expect to get better. All you girls—so many of you—and not a penny between you! It is flying in the face of Providence to refuse this chance.’

She pauses here, and Nan looks curiously at her, with her shapely head thrown well back, and an expression half contemptuous, half shocked, upon her beautiful lips. Truly, to wed with the crowd is to learn vulgarity. And all this sordid arguing, this eager dwelling upon money, what is it but the very essence of it?

‘May I ask what you are waiting for?’ cries Julia abruptly, as if losing patience.

‘The man I can love. That’s what I shall call “a good match,”’ says Nan gravely, quietly, yet with a suspicion of vehemence.

‘Nonsense,’ says her aunt, springing to her feet. ‘I

refuse to listen to such folly. Love is a dream ; money is a reality. Choose as you will. You are a headstrong girl, to whom it is useless to give solid advice. Penelope ! Where is that girl ? Taking a leaf out of your book, I suppose—imagining herself in love with a man who is as little likely to make a name for himself at his profession as I am.'

'What's *your* profession, Julia ?' asks Nan, giving way to mirth, though in reality heartily vexed.

But Mrs. Manly, scorning to reply, stalks out of the room and into her brougham, merely calling to Nan as she drives away a last pleasant word or two to the effect that, if Penelope and the others are not at the Galley Head in time, 'she is not going to wait dinner for them,' etc.

Nan, rather depressed, goes slowly from the hall door to the dining-room, where she finds Penelope and Gladys.

'Is she gone ?' asks Penelope in a fearful whisper.

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## CHAPTER II.

‘And she was flattered, worshipped, bored.’

‘OH! gone—yes,’ says Nan wearily; ‘I wish I could say for good.’

‘But are you sure, certain? I thought she would ask to see me again. You saw her go?’

‘Arrah, miss, didn’t ye hear her go?’ asks Mr. Murphy, who has been giving the battered old pieces of silver a severe cleaning, and is now replacing some of them upon the sideboard. ‘Faix, the clatther o’ thim ridicklus shoes ov hers goin’ down the steps a minnit since would have waked the seven sleepers were they snorin’.’

‘She’s gone indeed for a season,’ says Nan discontentedly, ‘after being about as disagreeable as ever she could be. Such a temper! And all because she s afraid her bonnet will be spoiled. I never met

anyone whose remarks are so full of the most execrably bad taste. And the worst of it is we have got to endure her. No hope of escape. I wish,' with a half-comic sigh, 'that somebody would run away with her.

A chuckle from the veteran at the sideboard here attracts their attention.

'Run away wid her, is it?' says he. 'Fegs, ye needn't think ye'll get rid of her that way. Divil a bit farther any dacent man would get wid her than the first lamp-post, anyhow.'

'Did she say anything more about me?' questions Penelope anxiously.

'No. She confined the rest of her conversation to a treatise on the perfection of Mr. Hume. She went away indignant, because I failed to see it was my duty to marry him, simply on account of his being richer than his neighbours.'

'Did she spake to you like that? Faix, quare as she is, she has glimmers o' sinse sometimes,' says Mr. Murphy, addressing an ancient candelabrum.

'I don't believe she's got one bit of conscience,' goes on Nan hotly, 'to try and induce me to marry

a man I don't care a pin about. It is disgraceful of her ! Just because she married for money herself she thinks all the world should go and do likewise.'

'Mercenary old thing !' says Gladys. 'You are quite right ; never listen to a word she says.'

'Oh, wisha ! Miss Gladys. May the saints give ye wisdom !' mutters Murphy, holding up his hands and the mustard-pot in dismay.

'I really begin to hate Mr. Hume,' says Nan, with a little frown. 'I hear nothing but his name, morning, noon, and night. One would think he was the last man left alive.'

'Poor Mr. Hume ! It is a shame to visit all this on him,' says Penelope gently. 'After all, it is not his fault, and surely he is very much to be liked.'

'More power to ye, Miss Penelope,' says Mr. Murphy to the salver. 'Now there goes wan reasonable girl, the heavens be praised !'

'No, he isn't,' says Nan fractiously, mindful of last evening's skirmish with that young man. 'He is both conceited and masterful. I can't bear him. I wish that horrid old uncle of his was alive, and then we should not be annoyed by his presence here.'

‘He’s a very kind man,’ says Penelope reproachfully. ‘Indeed, Nan, I think the only fault you see in him is that he is in love with you.’

‘Yes, really now, Nan, you must confess he is good-natured,’ says Gladys. ‘And as to the fact of his loving you being considered a fault, well, that’s a harsh way of looking at things.’

‘I wish a few more people with his fault would come down here,’ says Penelope, laughing; ‘that is, if I might be the object of their failing.’

‘I wish you were Mr. Hume’s object,’ declares Nan petulantly; ‘I confess I am tired to death of him—his name, his place, his money, his distinctly ugly face.’

‘Fegs an’ all, Miss Nan, ye ought to be ashamed o’ yerself!’ says Mr. Murphy, laying down the cruet-stand with a bang. ‘There’s Providence has thrown the biggest bit o’ luck that iver came to Rathmore into yer lap, and ye’re that ungrateful that ye’re a’most past praying for.’

‘*Et tu Brute!*’ cries Nan, turning upon him, not angrily, however, quite joyously. That she is amused is apparent, and this quick change in her from

despondency to mirth is hardly taken notice of by the others, so rapid are ever her transitions from mood to mood. She stands now silently looking at Murphy, as though inviting him to enter the lists and battle it out with her; but that wary old warrior, not understanding her war-cry, wisely refrains from making answer to it. A dim belief (born of her late truculent demeanour) that she has called him a brute is the one idea her words have conveyed to him.

‘You are as bad as Aunt Julia,’ says Nan, nodding her head at him. ‘I believe you, too, are devoid of conscience.’

‘Oh! don’t say that, me dear. Don’t ye now, Miss Nan. I’ve always lived a quiet an’ peaceable life, an’ there’s no man can pint the finger o’ scorn at me. ’Tis all for yer own good I spake, me dear, an’ that’—solemnly—‘ye know. A bad conscience is a bad thing,’ says Mr. Murphy, with deep meaning, ‘an’ of no service to anyone. Ye’ll mind Mike O’Rafferty, Miss Penelope? Him as buried the wife a month ago?’

‘Yes, the saddler’s man,’ says Penelope.

‘The same, miss. Well, here’s now for a rale



bad conscience for ye! Herself wasn't cowl'd in the grave a fortnight or less, when Mike began courtin' afresh that girl of the Donovans, all for the sake o' the pig an' the feather-bed that belongs to her. Ye know her too, miss, don't yer? A fat latherrawn of a girl widdout a word to throw to a dog. Well, anyhow, that's her picther, an' Mike thought good o' makin' her an' the pig his own. But fegs, miss, the wife, ye may be sure, had a word to say about that, though her lodgin' was in the cowl'd ground. There was no fear she'd stand bein' desarted in sich a powerful hurry; an' the long an' the short of it is that she appeared to him!

'Nonsense, Murphy!' says Nan.

'Oh!' flinging wide his arms. 'Divil a lie in it! Up she throtted from the chapel-yard an' stood up sthraight an' tall be his bedside. As sure as the day came that he wint to coort Moll Donovan, that night herself would come, an' stand over him in the dead pitch darkness.'

'But, then, how did he see her?' asks Penelope.

'Oh, me dear, sure ye know that sperits brings a light always along o' thim. An awful light, 'twould

make ye screech to see. For all the world like the shine ye'd make wid a lucifer match before sthrikin' it altogether.'

'Murphy, don't; you are making me creep,' cries Nan, so tragically that the old man believes her.

'Give us the third volume, Murphy,' says Gladys, who is honestly interested. 'Has he given up Moll, and gone back to his first allegiance?'

'Faix, no, me dear. 'Tis he's the cunning chap! He's found a way for himself out of his throuble, an' diddled the ould woman complately. He still keeps on at the shop at the daytime, but for the night he's taken a bedroom over Con Callaghan's stables, an' there he sleeps in clover. Dickens a bit o' the wife could find him iver since. He's done her entirely for this turn. Did ye iver hear o' sich a knowin' blaguard? An' wouldn't ye have thought now, Miss Nan, that a ghost would be more clever than that? To let herself be outwitted be a mere mortal. Look at the power o' thravellin', miss, she must have done for the past month, an' the sights she's seen. Glory be—'tis surprisin' how advantages is thrown away upon some people.'

‘The village is small ; she may find him yet,’ says Nan consolingly.

‘Well, they do say, miss, that she’s on her rounds. There’s been a lot of pinchin’ an’ pokin’ felt by the folks at night during the past week. There was Mary Maguire found yellin’ fit to kill herself the other morning at daybreak, an’ when they asked her what ailed her at all, at all, she said she felt the big toe-nail bein’ clean dragged off her by Mrs. O’Rafferty. The saints protect us ! But isn’t it a cruel thing, miss, that the innocent should suffer for the guilty ? However, there’s one comfort,’ says Murphy piously, ‘the hirin’ of that bedroom ivery night is costing him a purty penny.’

‘Here’s Mr. Hume driving up to the door,’ cries Gladys, looking out of the window. ‘Is he come for you, Nan ?’

‘Yes ; he said he’d drive me to Glandore. There, run and talk to him, while I put on my hat,’ says Nan, flying out of the room.

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### CHAPTER III.

‘ Like ghosts, pale drifts of mournful light  
Stretch in the west, and on the night  
Look with sad faces, wan and white.’

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LONG before Hume and Miss Delaney have reached Glandore, the latter has regained her normal frame of mind, that happy frame that as a rule renders her the most delightful of companions. Of all the Delaneys—and they are as happy-go-lucky a people as you could find—she is the gayest, the merriest, the most likely to adapt herself to any circumstances, however untoward, that might fall to her lot. The swift rushing through the air—chilly, as if in anticipation of some coming change—behind the two high-stepping bays, raises her spirits to such an altitude that the past worries of the morning fade into insignificance, and

seem, indeed, scarce worthy of a thought. Lighter than thistledown they now lie upon her memory.

Trotting the horses with rather reckless speed down that last steep little hill that leads to the pier, Hume brings them up then smartly, and the dingey being in readiness, Nan and he are rowed across to the *Zephyr*, to find that, though already very late as to the fixed hour of appointment, they are the first arrivals.

‘Dirty-looking weather, sir, I’m afraid,’ says the Captain—Gregson—speaking to Hume over Nan’s shoulder, as he gives her his hand up the ladder.

‘Oh, come, Mr. Gregson, you mustn’t say that!’ cries Nan gaily. ‘I am here to enjoy myself, and you won’t be the one to prevent me, will you?’

She beams upon the Captain as she says this with such delicately flushed cheeks, and deep appealing eyes, that no man with half a heart could resist her.

‘No, miss. No, indeed, Miss Delaney. It’s true I’ve seen worse days than this turn out very well towards evening.’

‘Then, this evening,’ asks Nan anxiously, ‘you think it will be lovely—eh?’

‘It may, miss ; it may, indeed,’ says Gregson, refusing to let his conscience have fair play. How can he damp the spirits of this pretty young lady, who is so plainly depending upon him to let her have a pleasant afternoon ? If she has chosen to elect him as her clerk of the weather for this special day, is he to be the one to refuse to do her allegiance ? From the first hour on which she had stepped aboard his employer’s yacht, now some weeks ago, he had succumbed to her charms—to her gentle, friendly way of treating him and all the other sailors.

‘Mr. Leslie’s party not come yet ?’ says Hume, more as a remark than a question.

‘No, sir ; not as yet. Something’s kept them, I suppose.’

The something, whatever it is, keeps them so long that at last it dawns upon the minds of those waiting for them on board the yacht that, in all probability, they do not mean to come at all.

‘Too bad, if they have really thrown us over,’ says Hume, coming up to Nan, after a brief consultation with Gregson, who has just given it as his opinion that the Leslies are weather-wise folk.

‘ You think they won’t come, then ? ’ says Nan, in a disappointed tone.

‘ Well, you see, it is growing late.’

‘ But not so very late. It is only because the day is dark that it looks so like evening.’

The disappointment is growing more intense.

‘ You see—Gregson says he believes they mistrust the day.’

As he says this he is conscious of a feeling that he is in fault somehow.

‘ Really ? Oh, how horrid of them ! Just like Jack Leslie ; such a girl of a man—always afraid of a wet jacket. And,’ defiantly, ‘ it isn’t going to rain, either.’

‘ There are worse things than rain ! I don’t fancy,’ smiling, ‘ he was afraid of that, or of anything, indeed, beyond the fact that I shouldn’t take out the yacht. Gregson says——’

‘ Gregson says it will be a grand evening,’ says Nan promptly. ‘ I asked him about it, and he said that. If Jack wasn’t afraid of his jacket he was afraid of sea-sickness. There is,’ with a steady look at him, ‘ nothing else to fear. Even if—outside there’—

pointing to the sea outside the harbour, 'it should be a little rough, who cares about that?'

Who, indeed, with those large dark entreating eyes fixed on his? But then the defalcation of the Leslies has left her without a chaperone. Could he possibly—no matter how keenly she may desire this sail that he can give her, and he alone—could he possibly take her out with him, and keep her away from her friends for so many hours, without another woman, without—— No, it is not to be thought of! Here he turns to say so, as gently as he can, and once more meets her questioning eyes. They are growing almost pathetic now. Whereupon he steels his heart. No; certainly it is not to be thought of for a moment. Those earnest, beseeching eyes still hold him. Well, at all events, if it is to be thought of, it is to be thought of for a long time first.

'I'm so distressed about it all,' he says, sitting down beside her, and looking really unhappy. 'To think you should have had your tiring drive here all for nothing!'

'But why for nothing?'

'Because I suppose I must now take you home again.'



‘ Oh, don’t say that,’ says Nan, her eyes filling with tears. ‘ Must I go home, and without even one delightful rush through the waves? Not even one sail! And it is so early yet. Could we not go out for even an hour or so? Just,’ coaxingly, ‘ for one little hour?’

‘ After all, I don’t see that it could make much difference,’ says Hume. He turns to Gregson, who is near.

‘ What about a short sail, Gregson?’ says he.

‘ As you will, sir,’ says Gregson; and half an hour later sees them outside the harbour, running swiftly eastwards before a strong and ever-increasing wind.

They have passed Adam and Eve now—the two islands that stand at the mouth of the harbour—and have left them so far behind that the flocks of black divers perched on their heights look less like birds than rows of ragged edges of rock.

‘ Like the teeth of a giant’s comb,’ says Nan with a little laugh so full of purest enjoyment that it does Hume’s heart good to hear it. As she speaks, she shakes out of her pretty hair the salt drops of spray that an admiring ocean has flung at her.

‘How you like the sea!’ says Hume.

‘That is too poor a word; I love it. Do you know,’ with a little touch of gravity that sits sweetly on her, ‘I don’t believe I should ever have grown quite strong again if it hadn’t been for this yacht, and therefore,’ kindly, ‘for you. You remember, when first you came, how miserable I was—how weak. All the spring and early summer I was laid low by that hateful fever, and then came that first day on board this boat—out at sea, with the fresh breeze blowing round me, and the dash of the salt waves in my face, and the sweet, mild smell of the sea everywhere. Oh, it put new life into me!’

‘Did it?’ says he slowly. And then a little quicker, ‘I wonder if you can guess at the new life you put into me?’

He checks himself here, ashamed of himself. It is not the time or place to betray his love for her.

‘Come down and have some lunch,’ he says abruptly, in as matter-of-fact a tone as he can conjure up at a moment when his heart is so full of joyful hope.

Far out at sea the fishing-boats can be seen; some

near, some so many miles distant that they show but indistinctly against the gray horizon, and are half lost in a delicate cloud of mist. All seem, however, to be making for home even thus early in the afternoon; and one by one they pass them by, the *Zephyr* rushing ever onwards, making a perfect picture against the dark green of the ocean, with her white sails shining like silver in the sullen light.

Past Milk-cove Harbour now they go, and now Sheeps-cove is left behind, and they are looking almost into Ross Bay, lying snugly between its two hills, and with the spire of St. Faughan's Cathedral—that most ancient of saints—rising high above the graveyard trees. Below is the coastguard station gleaming snow-white; over there the verdant woods of Cregane mounting from sea to sky. And now all this is forgotten, and they have left behind them not only Castle Hume frowning down upon the angry waves, but the lighthouse at the Galley Head, that good friend to those 'that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters.'

The sea has grown the colour of an ivy leaf, and here and there great bands of palest green lie between

dark borders. The sky is lowering, and seems as if it grew towards the ocean, whilst the sweet, drifting mists of evening have changed into a wild wet shower, mingled with a hoarse and rising gale of wind that rushes through the sails with angry, defiant shrieks. Whilst from the rocks and tiny islets lying round, and now half hidden by the clouds of foam that the violent waters have cast upwards to the frowning heavens, thousands of sea-gulls rise, and with discordant cries fly inland, as though scenting the coming storm.

And now—all at once—with an awful suddenness, the evening dies and night descends; within five minutes, or perhaps a little more, the outline of the coast disappears, and darkness settles on both sea and land. The white wings of the terrified gulls vanish as if by magic, and as if by magic, too, the whole expanse of heaven seems on fire—peal after peal of thunder rends the air—a mighty wind, let loose, rushes across the deep. The storm so long impending has at length caught earth and water in its fierce embrace.

## CHAPTER IV.

‘ There sits a bird on every tree  
Sing heigh-ho !  
There sits a bird on every tree  
And counts his love, as I do thee ;  
Sing heigh-ho, and heigh-ho !  
Young maids must marry ——.’

IT is many hours later, and now long past midnight, yet still the storm is raging in all its fury. When first it burst upon them, Hume and Mr. Gregson had made an effort to run for Ross Bay, a wild thought that resulted in absolute failure ; and now the *Zephyr* is tearing onward through the heavy seas, straining every nerve, as might a living thing, to resist the frenzy of the gale.

The night is black as pitch, the heavens like an inky cloud seem to hang close by, almost within reach of their hands, should they uplift them. Be-

hind them—far behind them now—the light from the Galley Head flashes out upon the darkness, the one touch of sympathy from those on land that reaches them. As the good yacht plunges into the trough of the seas, to rise again on each gigantic wave, this burning steadfast light seems to the anxious men on board like the grasp of a friendly hand.

Now and again, too, brilliant streaks of lightning light up the scene, showing the hills and vales of the wild sea, and the curling snowy foam on the tops of the angry waves that have hardly time to be blown away by the fierce wind, ere darkness falls again.

Hume, taking advantage of a moment when there seems to be a lull in the storm, runs down the stairs to the saloon, to find Nan clinging to a sofa, pale, and with large gleaming eyes. She compels herself to composure, however, and even conjures up a small smile to greet him.

‘Well, this can’t go on for ever, that’s one comfort,’ says the young man, sick at heart for her, because of that poor little miserable smile, yet speaking with an assumption of gaiety that he hardly hopes can

deceive her. 'This storm is bound to go down before morning.'

'Morning!' says she, in a low tone, a voice so unlike her usual merry one that he almost starts. 'Oh, surely it should be morning now!'

'Has it seemed so long?' says Hume. 'Oh, my poor girl, what a night it has been for you!'

'A night,' says she, with another wan little smile. 'Has it indeed been only one night, or a whole year of nights pressed into one? But,' feverishly, 'it must end soon. When will the day break? Tell me that. What makes it so long in coming? Is it the storm that makes it still so dark?'

Hume glances at the clock to see it had stopped at half-past eleven. Evidently she has no idea of the real time, and he finds now a difficulty in enlightening her, so many hours must still elapse before the welcome daylight greets her.

'Of course, such weather as this darkens everything,' he says evasively. 'But why don't you lie down? Why not try to sleep? In my cabin in there you might make yourself comfortable, and——'

'Oh, sleep!' says she.

‘You think you couldn’t, but you are so exhausted that you might sink into unconsciousness after a bit in spite of yourself. Do try it.’

‘To lie down would madden me,’ says she slowly. ‘To be able to move about is the only thing that helps me. To be alone is horrible. Oh, how long you were before you came down now!’ She stops and turns her eyes intently upon him. ‘Shall we be drowned?’ she says, with a curious steadiness.

‘Nonsense! Don’t give place to such a thought. Nan, is that how you have passed the night—in such fear as that?’ Involuntarily he moves closer to her, and takes her cold hand and presses it between both his own. ‘I wish to heaven,’ he says remorsefully, ‘that I had not brought you out to-day.’

‘No use thinking about that now; and it wasn’t your fault. I persuaded you against your better judgment. Besides,’ with a gentle glance, ‘if, as you say, there is really no danger, why, we may yet live to laugh at this hour, and when we get safely back to land we—— Ah, ah, what is that?’

A resounding crash overhead. Pressing her back



upon the sofa, he rushes on deck to find the mainmast has been carried away.

This last touch of malice seems to mark the end of the storm ; it is plainly dying out. The sea, however, is still running mountains high, and the yacht, disabled as it is, fights with it but feebly. Overhead the dense blackness has lifted somewhat, and a star or two can be distinctly seen. Notwithstanding these signs of approaching calm, the wind still blows a hurricane, and drives the yacht before it at full speed.

The men having cut free the dismantled mast, the boat once again rights itself, and Hume, who throughout the commotion has seen before him shining out of the darkness of the night the silent terrified eyes of Nan, and remembered, too, with what cruel want of ceremony and sympathy he had forced her back upon the sofa and left her, hurries down to her once more. The fear that she may have fainted there, alone, with no loving hand to help her, has been haunting him with a persistency that has half unnerved him.

But that she has been quite sensible of all the horrors of the last hour is quite plain to him as he enters the saloon. In one moment he can see that

she is still sitting on the sofa where he had left her, but the next—she has risen, and rushed to him, and literally flung herself into his arms.

‘Nan!’ says he, in a low voice almost choked. To have her here, in his arms, of her own accord!

‘Oh! I am frightened—frightened!’ cries she, with a gasp, and then she gives way altogether, worn out by the cruel strain of all this past mighty unrelieved terror, and laying her head upon his shoulder, she bursts into passionate sobs.

‘Darling! darling!’ whispers Hume, holding her to him, as though to prove to her that he is strong enough to protect her against all harms, as in this supreme moment he feels he indeed is. ‘Take courage; the worst is over. There is no longer any danger. There is not, I swear to you. Think! would I say that, if I still believed otherwise. I thank God that fear of any kind is at an end.’

But Nan still clings to him, her slender frame shaken by her sobs.

‘But what was that awful noise?’ she cries. ‘I thought it was the end! And you—you left me! Oh! it was horrible to be here alone, without a soul to

tell me how long it would be before I found myself struggling with the cold water. You should not have left me. I wonder I did not go mad. And now—even now—if there is hope,’ shivering, ‘it seems to have come too late—I cannot grasp it. How many hours ago is it?’

‘Scarcely one, and I could not have come sooner.’

‘Only one! I can’t remember how long ago it seems since you left me, but,’ sobbing freshly, ‘quite a terrible long time ago, at all events.’

As she says this she tightens the grasp of her fingers on his arm, and presses closer to him, as though once again overcome by the tortures past; Hume, with a beating heart, lifts the trembling hand and presses it to his lips.

Alas for that one sweet moment when his arms encircled her, she willing! And alas for the wild, glad, mad belief that then entered into him, that it was for love she had thus turned to him, in her fear and trouble!

All her nervousness she cries out upon his breast, thinking of him only, poor child, if she thinks at all, as a friend, a help—one who will feel with and for

her. A sense of protection in the support of his arms soothes her, and she is indeed so far weakened by all she has gone through, that she would have clung to any friendly figure as she now clings to him. He is nothing to her beyond a fellow-sufferer—a being sufficiently well known and trusted—let her cry aloud to him the fear that has been consuming her.

But to him, her tender recognition of him as a friend in time of trouble has had but one meaning. Surely she would not have thus come to him, would not thus so sweetly have surrendered herself, had not her heart spoken. In her misery, her despair, her loneliness, she had rushed to him, had thrown herself gladly into his arms. The word ‘gladly’ he puts in with all modesty, yet with a sure, and certain, and thankful belief in the truth of it. One fact alone escapes him, that, in her fear, there was no one else to whom she could have gone.

‘It will be all over soon,’ says he gently; with one hand he smooths her ruffled hair, putting it back from her burning forehead. Yet it is noticeable that, in spite of this new joyful belief in her affection for him, he never attempts to kiss her. The pretty oval

of her cheek lies clear to him, yet, though an almost unconquerable desire to press his lips to it urges him to the deed, he refrains. The very fact that she is his guest may have restrained him—or perhaps an unacknowledged, almost unknown doubt of that love of her for him, of which but now he has assured himself.

‘The clouds are breaking,’ he goes on presently. ‘Before I came down I saw a star or two, and though the wind is still strong we no longer fear it. Come, now, that’s good news, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, if one dared believe it,’ says she, with a long-drawn quivering sigh. ‘The last time you came down you made quite light of our peril, too, and yet it was then that that awful sound reached me. What was it? I felt the yacht tremble all through. I thought we were going down,’ she shudders.

‘The mainmast was carried away just then.’

‘The big mast! Oh! how can you say danger is at an end? How,’ reproachfully, ‘can we ever get back to Glandore without it?’

‘Well,’ says he, pausing as if to choose his words, ‘you must not think a mast is everything. I promise you we shall get to—to—land without it.’

‘I don’t think there is any use in your saying any more, thank you,’ says she, in a tone of humble resignation. ‘I know we are going to be drowned, and, though I am sure you mean to be kind, I think I should rather be prepared for it, than find myself all at once in the water without a second’s warning. The shock would be less, I think.’

‘I know what’s the matter with you,’ says he brightly. ‘You are hungry ; you are worn out ; you want something to bring you up a rung or two. Now, sit down here, and hold on to the table while I get you something.’

He makes her sit down with all the airs of a proprietor—unnoticed by her—but so delightful to him, that he feels his heart brimming over with ecstasy. She is his, surely. This terrible night—this thrice blessed night—has given her to him. His pulses are beating wildly, he can hardly restrain the content that is his ; it is with difficulty he subdues the happy smile that strives for mastery on his lips, as he opens a bottle of champagne, and compels her to take some of it. This, with a biscuit or two, is all he can induce her to take.

‘I think I am too tired to eat,’ says she at last, with a weary little laugh. The champagne has so far done her good, that she has consented to regard their position as being in one degree outside the jaws of death.

‘Then you shall lie down,’ says he, still with that new delicious touch of authority in his whole air. And Nan, too worn out to argue further, and in truth longing to make welcome the sleep that is already weighing down her eyelids, follows him to the door of his cabin.

‘Good-night,’ says he, holding her hand for a moment.

‘Good-morning,’ returns she, with a faint return of her old gaiety, pointing to the stairs, down which the first pale gleams of coming day are stealing.

‘True, true!’ says Hume. ‘May it be a happy one.’ He looks at her again, and lifting her hand, lays it upon his lips.

## CHAPTER V.

‘My temples throb, my pulses boil,  
I’m sick of song.’

THE day has, indeed, broken as he reaches the deck ; a sullen morning, truly, but nevertheless most welcome—far more welcome to those now watching its dull uprising than have been thousands of its more brilliant compeers. Across the vast expanse of water—still angry, and dying with reluctance into the ordinary calm, as if grieving for last night’s wild, glorious frenzy—there steals a soft, tremulous pallor, now here, now gone, now here again, that finally resolves itself into the common daylight.

‘Yon gray lines,  
That fret the clouds, are messengers of day.’

A slight mist is falling, and a deadly chill pervades



the air ; but Hume, whose soul is on fire, sees nothing of the dreariness that marks the morn—feels nothing of its cold and discomfort.

She had run to him of her own accord, had thrown her arms around him ! Sweet arms ! Dear arms ! Did the whole wide earth ever contain a creature so altogether lovely as is she ? And surely she would not have thus wholly abandoned herself to him, had not her heart pleaded for him. He is too blest—too happy ! There can be no mistake either, for when he clasped her to him, she had not shrunk from him ; nay, rather, she had clung the closer, as though welcoming his protection. Was ever a man so fortunate ?

He feels as if he wanted to do something for everybody he knows, so he begins with the sailors, and determines to treble the amount of the present he would on an ordinary occasion have made them, over and above their wages, after an affair of this kind—a night in which they had battled valiantly with death, and gained the victory. This determination he held to when all his circumstances had changed, and despair instead of joy was his.

Presently the mist clears off a little, and the day grows more distinct. The wind is still turbulent, and the *Zephyr*, half dismantled, flies before it, as if exulting still in the victory gained over the storm now dead.

‘Where are we, Gregson?’ asks Hume, who has been lost in a happy reverie, but brings himself back to the present as he sees the captain approaching.

‘Nearer England than Ireland, sir,’ says that taciturn person.

‘Yes,’ says Hume, still a little dreamily. ‘Where are you making for?’

‘Milford, sir. It’s our best tack now,’ says the captain. ‘With this wind we shall be there by evening.’

‘Evening,’ repeats Hume to himself. He is grown rather grave, and leaning over the bulwarks looks out to sea.

It is well worth a look! The mist has vanished almost as suddenly as it came, and the clouds above parting slowly, heavily, a brilliant glorious gleam of early sunshine streams down upon the foaming waves, gilding each crest with crimson. Spots of blood they

seem in the quick uncertain lights that the heavens emit, the day being still in a half-hearted state, gray now, and now crimson, and now yellow and crimson mingled in a glowing splendour. After all, in spite of its bad promise, the day is going to be a glorious one.

Twice he had gone down to see if Nan is awake, to find her still wrapt in slumber—or at all events to imagine her so. He has grown positively nervous about her, and is for the fourth or fifth time battling with the fear that she may be dead through excess of terror born of last night's mischances, when about twelve o'clock the door of his cabin opens and Nan steps forth.

Such a lovely Nan ! A little dark beneath the eyes, perhaps, because of past anxiety, a little pale for loss of sleep, a little melancholy about the lips because of the uncertainty that still reigns in her bosom—but a most beautiful sweetheart for all that.

‘At last !’ says he, advancing towards her.

‘I have been lazy, haven't I?’ says she with a flickering smile.

‘I’m glad of it,’ says Hume. ‘It shows me you slept, at all events, and sleep you wanted. Well, has your laziness given you an appetite?’

‘That’s not the word,’ says she, laughing; ‘appetite is a small thing compared with the demon that is devouring me. What is there for breakfast? Something nice, I hope, and a great deal of it. And —— Oh,’ suddenly, and turning to him with a very earnest face, ‘what I really want to say to you is, that I am so glad the storm is gone quite away. It is a beautiful morning, isn’t it? We shall be home again in no time.’

‘Breakfast, sir,’ says the steward behind them. Hume acknowledges his kindness with suspicious gladness.

‘Breakfast first—conversation afterwards,’ says he, leading Nan to a table, so delicately spread that last night’s storm seems nothing more than a passing and most disagreeable nightmare.

Hunger appeased, however—and this takes a reasonable time, Nan’s appetite being of the distinctly healthy order—her mind returns to actualities.

‘What o’clock is it now?’ asks she, looking at Hume across the cutlets.

‘Twelve.’

‘So late! What a fright they must be in at home!’ She pauses as if a little frightened herself, and now goes on. ‘But they won’t have to waste much more time on conjecture, will they? We shall be in the harbour very soon now, shan’t we?’

Hume hesitates. She is so openly sure that they are on their homeward way, is so distinctly anxious that they should soon reach land, that his heart fails him when he dwells upon the honest truth. It is an unfortunate hesitation.

‘Very soon,’ says he, not looking at her.

‘But what does that mean? Shall we get into Glandore by three? No! Four then? Half-past four? Five?’

‘I am afraid not,’ slowly.

‘Oh, that is too bad!’ cries she impulsively. ‘And I promised so faithfully to meet him to-day.’

Hume starts as if shot. A quick sharp pang pierces his heart. Like a flash of lightning the real truth comes home to his heart, and all his fair dreams of

a few hours since lie as crushed, and dead, and scentless as though they had never been.

Although he has not spoken, something in the strangeness of his glance compels her to answer the question in it.

‘I should not care so much about keeping my promise to him,’ she says, growing unaccountably nervous beneath his steady, almost threatening regard. ‘But he was so angry when I told him that I was coming out with you to-day, yesterday—oh, was it yesterday?’ a frightened expression coming into her pretty face. ‘And you know what a temper he has; and so I said I should meet him, and—and now, what shall I do?’

“He,”—“him,”—who?” demands he with a violence but badly subdued.

‘Why, Boyle, of course; who else should it be?’ says she.

Something of rage, and misery, and despair mingled checks his utterance for a moment or two, but now he bursts out passionately:

‘So, after all, your escape from death just resolves itself into a regret that the past storm has prevented

you from meeting "him" to-day; I am as nothing to you! We have been at the gates of the grave together, you and I, and yet your first thought is for him. Not for the anxiety you have caused your sisters, your brothers, but for "him." What,' says he sternly, seizing her by the wrist, and compelling her to meet his gaze—'what am I to learn from that?'

With a swift but passionate movement Nan wrenches herself free.

'Learn,' says she haughtily, 'for one thing, that I will answer no questions put to me in that tone; for another, have you yet to be taught that I am—unfortunately—your guest?'

She is standing back from him now, and is looking at him with defiance written on every line of her face.

'Unfortunately, indeed,' says Hume, 'for me. But a few hours ago, and I believed myself the happiest man alive, and now—now—I am to know that I am less than nothing to you. Even when you lay within my arms your thoughts were of another. Great Heaven! How can you stand there so calm when

I am broken-hearted? Do you never think? Have you no conscience? Don't you care?' He breaks off abruptly, as if afraid to go on.

'All this is of no consequence,' says she with a little angry, emphatic gesture of the hand. 'What I want to know is when I shall get home.'

Her tone is irritating. It says plainly, 'When shall I get rid of you?' Hume's face darkens, and he moves a step nearer to her.

'That depends upon yourself,' he says. 'I told you once you should never marry any man but me. I shall keep to that determination.'

'You mean——' says she, and then she pauses. 'When shall we reach home?' she asks again, but now in a trembling tone.

'Never!' returns he violently, 'until you consent to marry me.'



## CHAPTER VI.

‘ Love, you dear delusive dream, you ! Very sweet your victims  
deem you,  
When, heard only by the seamew, they talk all the stuff they  
can.’

NOT until he has reached the deck does his right mind return to him, and with it overwhelming regret and shame. But the reckless words that had issued from his lips could not now be recalled—and later on bear bitter fruit. Of all his misery this sense of having forgotten himself stings keenest ; and in truth the first misery, the knowledge that he has no part, no place in her affections, is cruel enough to suffice for one time. For a few sweet blessed hours he had believed she loved him, and the awakening from that belief has been little short of a death-blow. Until this imaginary finding, and, after it, the loss of her,

he had not known the depth of the passion that she had aroused within his heart. It is part of his being—a love so strong, so earnest, so ardent, that even the fact that she does not, or ever will, care for him, has not the power to destroy it.

What madness possessed him to cherish that fond delusion that she had at last given herself to him? Why, even as she lay upon his breast, she had cared nothing for him. She had simply clung to him, as she might have clung to a senseless log, if in it safety lay. No; he is nothing to her.

But is that any reason why he should have said to her what he did? It amounted to a threat; a threat to one beneath his roof as it were, and in a sense in his power! Standing looking down into the water, with now and again the salt spray flinging itself against his face, he lives over again this last disastrous half-hour, and deliberately condemns himself.

It is difficult to follow out the workings of a man's mind, but I know that Hume, after a severe self-analysis, tells himself that but one course is open to him, to go down, to see her again—fraught with inexpressible pain as this move must be—and apologize

to her for the words he had used when last he left her.

She is standing now exactly where she had stood then. One might imagine her graven in stone, so motionless is her attitude. As he approaches, however, she lifts her head and looks steadily at him.

‘I have come to beg your pardon,’ says Hume slowly, as if finding it hard to speak. ‘I should not have spoken to you as I did. And as for what I said, it was absurd. That you know for yourself.’

‘I know so little,’ returns she slowly, ‘that more or less I must depend upon you. A sorry thing for me.’

‘I deserve that, of course,’ says Hume, paling a little.

‘My ignorance is indeed so great,’ says the girl immovably, ‘that for the third time I am compelled to ask you—you, who hitherto have refused to answer—when we shall reach Glandore.’

‘Here again you place me in the wrong, and justly,’ says Hume. ‘I should have told you at first what I must tell you now, that in our maimed condition we

cannot get back to Ireland. We are making for Milford. It would be impossible to get back to Glandore with this wind.'

He pauses, and looks at her with indescribable anxiety ; and for some time she does not speak, but now——

'I don't believe you,' she says, in a low, determined tone.

'You don't know what you are saying,' says Hume, the blood flushing his face again. 'With the mainmast gone, and this wind in our teeth, it would be impossible to return to Glandore. You can ask Gregson ; he may be able to explain it to you.'

'I want no one to explain anything. I can see it all quite clearly for myself. Now that I look back upon everything,' says Nan, 'I can see that you laid your plans beforehand, that you did it all on purpose. I don't believe you ever asked the Leslies to join you ; and you persuaded me to——'

'I persuaded you,' interrupts Hume, stung by the glaring injustice of this charge—'I ? Was it not you yourself who suggested a short sail, who——'

‘Ah! you knew who you had got to deal with,’ says Nan; ‘you knew I could not resist the sea. And you built on that, and——’

‘And no doubt I turned on the storm to order,’ says Hume contemptuously. ‘Cagliostro was a fool to me. Let us talk sense, I beseech you, and not descend to such child’s play as this. I tell you we cannot return to Ireland until we first reach England, and that will not be until this evening.’

‘That means that I cannot return to Rathmore until another night and day have gone by. Two days, two nights; oh, what must they be thinking?’ cries she, so miserably that Hume’s heart bleeds for her.

‘I can telegraph to them the moment we reach Milford,’ says he hastily.

‘You shall do nothing for me,’ returns she stormily. ‘I wish with all my heart I had never seen you; you have been nothing but a trouble, and a cause of dissension to me from first to last. And now what have you done? Because of you I shall be scolded, and regarded with cold eyes by all of them when I get back. Julia will have a thousand hateful

things to say; father a thousand more. Oh, how shall I ever face them?’

‘You needn’t,’ says Hume slowly.

‘What!’ cries she, flashing round at him, whilst heavy tears gather in her eyes. ‘You think, then, that fear will induce me to go to you. You little know me. No, no. Cold looks or scoldings would be small things in comparison with the horror of being your wife. Besides, what have I done? They can only say I was merely going out without the Leslies, that is all. That is nothing. And to escape such a trifle as that by the sacrifice of my whole life would never occur to me. Besides, to prove to you how foolish is your design—if, indeed, to avoid a scolding or two I should dream of marrying anyone—there are other people in the world besides you. There,’ defiantly, ‘there is Boyle, for example. He would not be angry with me.’

Beyond the fear of a lecture from Julia, and a scathing sarcasm or two from her father, she has evidently no fears for the future. The fact that scandal outside her family circle may be busy with her name, because of her absence from home for two

days and nights with Hume, never seems to occur to her. For this, at least, Hume is grateful.

‘Don’t you think, instead of accusing me, you had better discuss your plans,’ says he coldly. ‘We shall get into Milford late to-night. You can go to an hotel there, and take the morning boat back to Cork.’

‘Don’t trouble yourself to arrange my plans for me,’ says she with a frown. ‘I shall go to no hotel ; I shall go straight on to London. I have an uncle there. He will take care of me, until at home they have forgotten all about this scrape into which you have led me.’

‘As you will,’ says Hume, ignoring this last accusation. ‘We shall catch the night mail, and reach London by morning.’

‘You shall not accompany me,’ cries she, with an angry stamp of her foot. ‘All my desire is to bid you good-bye for ever. Whatever my ticket costs, my uncle shall repay you ; but beyond your help so far, I want nothing of you.’

‘Nevertheless, I shall take you to your uncle’s,’ says Hume icily. ‘Make up your mind at once to that.’

‘But why, why, why?’ cries she passionately; and then, as if overcome, she bursts into tears. ‘Oh, am I never to get rid of you?’ sobs she vehemently. ‘Must I indeed endure you for all these long, long hours before I reach London?’

‘I am afraid so,’ says Hume bitterly, turning away.

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All the rest of the intervening time before town is reached passes like a dream. At Milford, finding the telegraph office just on the point of closing, Mr. Hume sends a message to Rathmore with a view to allaying anxiety there; and after that comes the long dreary waiting for the night train that must take them up to London.

Nan, with an obstinacy foreign to her, has resolutely declined to go to an hotel, or even to eat or drink. She makes it, indeed, very plain to him that she will accept nothing at his hands, and perversely declines to answer him when he finds it necessary to put to her a question. In deadly silence, refusing even to meet his eyes, she sits out, in the dismal waiting-room at the station, the hours that must elapse before



the train departs. Tired out, even exhausted, both in mind and body, she still so far conquers triumphantly the pangs of nature, that she disdains even to look at the tray, daintily arranged, that Hume has desired a waiter to lay beside her. Seeing this, an almost vehement anger against her rises within Hume's breast; an anger largely mingled with unhappiness.

'The train is about to start,' he says abruptly, entering the waiting-room, whereupon she rises and follows him to the carriage he has secured for her. He has bought her a railway lamp and an innumerable quantity of papers—he has filled the carriage with rugs and cushions—done all, in fact, that he can do to make her comfortable—in vain. With a little scornful gesture, she flings the papers far from her on to the opposite seat, piles the cushions on the top of them, and makes a heap of the rugs upon the floor.

'Don't be a fool,' says Hume savagely. 'It will be bitterly cold presently, and you—— Take one rug, at all events.'

To this appeal she makes no reply. Leaning back in her corner she closes her eyes and turns her head

aside, as though no such person as Hume is in existence.

Later on, during the night, he manages to secure at one of the stations some grapes that he hopes, though faintly, may tempt her to break the fast she has now so obstinately kept for such a terrible time. Laying them by her side without a word, he retreats to his end of the carriage, which now they have to themselves, and waits with very considerable anxiety for what she may chance to do with them.

To his inexpressible relief she lets them lie where he has placed them, instead of instantly rejecting them, as had been her way with the papers and rugs.

There is a slight delay before the train moves on again, quite four or five minutes, and still she suffers the fruit to lie unmolested by her. Hume's heart beats high with hope. Perhaps, after all, when she has had time to reflect, she will exonerate him from blame in this matter ; will even restore him to favour. If already she has so far forgiven him as to accept something at his hands, is it not a sign that she may grant still greater kindnesses later on ? That he has

been the unfortunate means of seriously compromising her he feels bitterly. Innocent as the whole affair has been, there will not be wanting censorious tongues to give it so black a shade that it will be impossible to prove its whiteness. If she would but consent to the one remedy—a marriage with him.

A glance at the cold, proud profile refuses him hope in this quarter, and yet how is she to return home again, to submit to the hints and innuendoes, the slights, the sneers to which her rivals will be only too glad to subject her? He, and he alone, can come to her rescue. This uncle, he may have influence with her. The desire to enlist him on his side grows strong within Hume's breast.

But she may herself consent. Her fancy for French may not have gone deep, and if reasoned with—if—— Surely this all-absorbing love that he, Hume, bears for her, must at last compel a return? And even now, angry as she has been, is she not relenting? She has not openly refused those grapes. If she indeed accepts them, may it not be a sign that——

His thoughts here get an abrupt check. The train

has once more started, and the lights of the station now lie far behind them. Nan has risen and lifted the window. A swift current of air rushes in, so keen and strong that it ruffles the soft hair lying on her forehead. Still holding up the window, she bends backwards, takes up the grapes, and slowly, deliberately drops them into the blackness of the night.

A moment later she has lowered the sash again, has dropped back into her seat, has resumed her old position. Once more silence falls upon the two occupants of this carriage ; and upon the heart of one—despair !

## CHAPTER VII.

‘ Clouds will gather round the evening star—  
Sorrow may silence our first gay rhyme.’

IGNORANT of the laws that rule society in London, it had never occurred to Nan that in the month of September her uncle, Mr. Blake, might reasonably be supposed to be out of town. Providentially, however, he is not, and is still lingering over a late breakfast when Nan and Hume are announced. His wife and daughter have found a resting-place somewhere in the Riviera by this time, but Business, always spelled with a capital letter in Mr. Blake’s mind, keeps him still in town.

He is a tall, thin man, rather bald, and grown nervous through long battling with an adverse fortune. Fate, indeed, had dealt him many a buffet before he reached his present comfortable position, and the

signs of the struggles now overcome live with him always. The sparse locks he still possesses are of a sandy hue—gray-bitten—and hang exceedingly limp. Few things so white, so even, as the parting that divides these skimpy hairs can hardly be imagined. To the intelligent observer it seems to run from the back of his head straight down to the tip of his nose, which is elongated to quite a remarkable degree. The forehead in this ‘run’ is of no account at all. One can see nothing but that snowy road marching right down his head to the end of the proboscis. It positively fascinates. It might suggest itself to the imaginative mind, that were a little fairy to be placed on the top of Mr. Blake’s head, what a delightful race it could have down that fine smooth pate right on to the end of his nose, where from that noble Roman peak he might survey the world.

He is a quiet man, calm to an almost irritating degree, and fearful of shock or surprise. To float easily down what is still left to him of the river of life is his one ambition—safe from sunken rocks and jagged edges, and all that could make the passage disagreeable. Anything new or strange, or out of

the common run of his existence, would be so distasteful to him as to be almost a terror. It is then with unmixed dismay that he gazes on Hume's card, and hears the butler tell him that Miss Delaney is in the library.

Miss Delaney ! Good heavens ! it must be one of those Irish girls, one of his dead sister's children—a child of that abominable, bloodless, sarcastic old Delaney.

‘ A young lady, Simpkins ? ’

‘ Quite young, sir—very young. ’

‘ Child, eh ? ’

‘ No, sir. Young lady, as you said, sir. Tall—h'm—and not unlike yourself, sir. The young gentleman's tall, too, sir. ’

‘ Oh, I dare say, ’ says Mr. Blake wearily. Who on earth can the ‘ young gentleman ’ be ? Not a nephew, as his name is Hume. Not even a nephew-in-law, as her name is still Delaney. A young girl, and tall, running about the world with a young man who is apparently nothing in the world to her ! Mr. Blake's spirits sink to zero.

Slowly, very slowly, he rises and reaches the

library, to find there a pale indignant girl, and a man scarcely less so. It is with the greatest difficulty Hume makes an attempt to explain their presence here, being interrupted vehemently by Nan at the end of almost every sentence. Indeed, presently Mr. Blake—who is now thoroughly alarmed and upset, and considerably mixed as to the principal points—throws up his hands in despair, and asks brokenheartedly that one at least will be silent whilst the other speaks.

He leans back in his chair as he makes this distracted appeal, and passes his hand over his forehead in a bewildered fashion. To have a niece dropped down upon him in this unexpected way by the clouds, or rather thrown up at him by the ocean, is more than he can instantly feel grateful for—a niece of whose existence he had hardly been aware. He had once, indeed, gone over to Ireland to see his sister, when Nan and Penelope had been but little things, and Bartle an infant in arms, and had then and there taken an inveterate dislike to his brother-in-law, for which few men could blame him. He had not gone there again, and year after year added to the



estrangement that then arose between him and his sister, though through no fault of hers, as he always felt and acknowledged. It was only that he could not stand Delaney.

And now, after fourteen years or so, comes this girl, tall, defiant, and the very image of the dead sister who once, at all events, had been dear to him. How or with whom she has come is but a clouded tale to the poor puzzled gentleman sitting in a dismal silence, with one hand rubbing dolefully at his forehead.

That there is something distinctly grave about the matter he is compelled to understand by Nan's white face and angry eyes, and Hume's air of being on the defensive. But what is it?

Hume had prepared a short speech—arranged during that terrible night journey in the train—a speech meant to explain all things in as few words as possible, and that went fluently enough for some time; but when he got to that part when he declared his inability to return to Glandore, Nan interrupted him.

'That is not true,' says she, in a low distinct tone,

and with a glance of burning hatred. And from that moment she contradicted him flatly at every chance.

‘If I might speak to you alone,’ says Hume, at last, turning a rather pale face to Mr. Blake. That he is with difficulty restraining his temper the latter can see at a glance.

‘Yes, yes; just so—exactly,’ says poor Mr. Blake nervously. He is on thorns by this time, and indeed distinctly frightened. What sin has he committed in all his peaceful life that these two terrible people, with faces full of wrath, should be thus flung into his path? And what has he done that they should both regard him with such an angry eye? Let them fight it out with each other by all means, but why drag an unoffending gentleman into it? He feels as if he were standing between two fires, and were making ready for death that may come at any instant. Good heavens, if he could get this girl out of the room! Both of them out of the room would be better—would let him breathe more easily—but even one out of the way would be a distinct relief.

Mechanically he walks to the bell and pulls it vigorously.

‘Send Mrs. Weston here,’ says he to the man who answers it.

‘You must be tired, my dear—dreadfully tired,’ turning to Nan, who looks the very incarnation of health and youth and indignation. ‘Worn out, I should say, from your—er—disastrous journey. Perhaps, if——’

‘I am not tired,’ says Nan sternly. ‘I never felt better in my life. I am ready to start on another journey at once. I want to go home.’

‘Why, so you shall, my dear—er—presently.’

‘No, at once,’ emphatically. ‘I shall start this instant. I only came here to let you know—to let you be a witness to the way I have been treated by—by him!’ pointing the finger of scorn at Hume, who disdains to see it.

‘Yes, yes—it was most unfortunate—most uncomfortable,’ said Mr. Blake, with a heartfelt sigh; ‘but as to starting this instant, my dear, on your homeward route, I fear, I greatly fear’—another eloquent sigh—‘that will be impossible.’

‘It shan’t be—I must go!’ cries Nan vehemently.

‘The—er—the railway service is sadly deficient, I’m afraid,’ says Mr. Blake meekly; ‘I doubt if there will be a train to suit you before this evening. I’m—I’m dreadfully sorry about it,’ says the poor man, with profound sincerity.

‘Not until this evening? How am I to live till then?’ exclaims Nan, her tone full of impatient disgust.

‘We must all live through our misfortunes,’ says Mr. Blake, with a heavy sigh. ‘Ah, Mrs. Weston, will you take my niece upstairs and—er—make her comfortable during her stay here? Go, my dear—go with my housekeeper and try and get a little rest.’

‘You want to get me out of the way,’ says Nan, with a defiant glance at Hume, who returns it with interest. ‘Well, I’ll go—but,’ turning to her uncle, ‘don’t believe one word he says! He’d say anything to suit his own purpose.’

‘You are over-fatigued, my dear; quite done up,’ says Mr. Blake feverishly, seeing Hume take a step forward. ‘Go—go away, I entreat you, and lie down.’

‘Yes, I’m going,’ says Miss Delaney, moving

towards the door, whereupon hope rises high in Mr. Blake's breast. Half-way there, however, she stops and turns again, and hope lies dead.

'Are you sure there is no train before this evening?' asks she, fixing her large gray eyes upon her uncle.

'Quite sure, my dear.'

'Then, I suppose, I must be content with it,' says she, with all the air of one making a grand concession.

Once more she moves on, but, with her fingers on the handle of the door, looks back again, this time at Hume.

'Wait till they hear about you at home!' says she, with awful meaning.

## CHAPTER VIII.

‘ Catch her, and hold her, if you can ;  
See, she defies you.’

LEFT to himself, Hume steadily lays the whole circumstances of the case before Mr. Blake. Dwelling very lightly upon the storm and its consequences, he lingers over the fact of his love for Miss Delaney, and his ardent desire to bestow upon her his name, his place, and his very considerable income. To a man like Mr. Blake, who has fought hard for his own income, there is a charm in so many thousands a year got without any difficulty whatsoever ; and there is another charm too in the fact that the possessor of this comfortable rent-roll is no shoddy person, but a decent gentleman of many generations. Mr. Blake, whose blood is Irish, of very long descent, has not been so shattered by his fight with fortune as to lose

touch with the fact that blue blood is, as a rule, true blood.

‘This unlucky storm and its consequences has rather undone me with her,’ says Hume, who is now speaking with a more natural eloquence, seeing that Mr. Blake has somewhat gone over to his side. ‘I have told you that this apparent elopement is no fault of mine, and though she, Miss Delaney, refuses to believe in my innocence, I do not doubt but that you will be able to see matters as they really are. You,’ here his face grows graver, ‘you will be able, too, to see how serious this affair may be for her.’

There is a pause. Mr. Blake, troubled and uncertain, lies back in his chair, his finger-tips touching each other, his mind all abroad. Presently the young man speaks again.

‘You see how it is,’ he says, with almost painful earnestness, and a touch of impatience. ‘There will be talk—scandal. It is impossible to stop that sort of thing, and she—she thinks of nothing. She will not understand; I think,’ with a sudden softening of his face, ‘she doesn’t understand.’

‘Eh ! no,’ says Mr. Blake vaguely.

‘Well, it must be explained to her, you know,’ says Hume, with a decision that rouses Mr. Blake. ‘You see that, don’t you ?’

‘Ye-es,’ rather faintly. Surely it can’t be possible that this terribly energetic young man can mean that he——

‘Well, you must do it,’ says Hume promptly.

‘Who—I ! My dear sir, I couldn’t, I—I——’

‘Yes—you ! You, of course. You are her uncle. You stand now in the position of a father to her.’

‘It is a most monstrous suggestion,’ says Mr. Blake, rising to his feet. ‘Here is a perfect stranger cast upon my hands without a moment’s warning, and——’

‘Stranger !’

‘Certainly. Niece or not, she is a stranger, and I am told that I must go and explain to her that either she must marry you, to whom she seems to have a most decided dislike, or—run the gauntlet of her women friends’ censure.’

‘You have put the case very correctly,’ says Hume.

‘There it lies in a nutshell. If she will consent to



marry me, I shall settle on her any sum you like, and leave her everything I possess, on my death, should she survive me, which I trust she will.'

'You shouldn't be too impulsive; you should remember there may be others to be considered. Your children,' says Mr. Blake, rather lucidly for him.

'Oh, as for that,' says Hume, and he rises abruptly from his chair, and a frown darkens his face, 'you said just now she disliked me. If I urge a marriage between us, it is simply to save her from annoyance, from—— If you speak to her, tell her she shall be as free after the marriage as before it.'

'I hardly think you know to what you are pledging yourself,' says Mr. Blake, staring at him.

'I do, perfectly. If ever she came to care for me, things could of course be altered. And after all, why shouldn't she care?' exclaims he with sudden fire; 'why shouldn't she be happy with me? I should make it the business of my life to gratify her every wish. An honest love like mine should be strong enough to gain a return.'

'Women are so wanting in common-sense,' says

Mr. Blake feebly. With wonder, largely mingled with respect, he now regards the young man before him. What on earth has possessed him that he—rich, well-born, respectable—should elect to fall in love with a girl who apparently doesn't care a button for him, a girl who, so far as Mr. Blake can judge, is a veritable firebrand? Has luck forsaken him? Or is he merely thrall to a passing fancy? A glance at the determined face of Hume decides this last question.

No, he is thoroughly in earnest; so earnest that his rather ordinary features grow positively handsome to Mr. Blake. Ordinary features certainly, but beyond doubt those of a gentleman; they might indeed be ten times plainer, but with the stamp they now wear would still declare him one of those who should be leaders of the common herd. Mr. Blake, gazing intently at him, feels that as a nephew-in-law he could make him extremely welcome. Such nephews do not drop into one's path at every change of wind. As a son-in-law, even, he would be unexceptionable. And to think that just now upstairs there is someone who refuses to see all these excel-

lencies! What does the girl want? Mr. Blake feels as if he should like to ask her that.

‘My sister, Lady Despard, is in town just now, by a fortunate chance,’ says Hume. ‘She will call, and will receive Miss Delaney, I am sure, if it is inconvenient to you to have her here, now Mrs. Blake is out of town.’

‘Lady Despard—er—Sir William Despard?’ questions Mr. Blake awkwardly. Can it be the real Lady Despard, who has kept all London alive during the season, and made herself a name before which the most chosen of the earth must bow?

‘Yes, she married Sir William,’ says Hume indifferently. It seems to him a matter of small moment that his sister should be the wife of a titled millionaire, when Nan is probably lying upstairs angry and unhappy.

‘If you can persuade your niece to listen to me, and bridge this difficulty by permitting me to give her my name, I feel sure Lady Despard will be very pleased to receive her, and keep her as her guest until the wedding can be accomplished.’

‘As for that, she can stay here,’ says Mr. Blake

somewhat shortly. 'It is a very unfortunate affair all through, but——'

'It need not be,' interrupts Hume quickly. 'If you will speak to her she will perhaps listen, and—— You are her uncle, you must have some influence with her.'

'Yes, yes. Yes, that is how it would look to you, of course,' says Mr. Blake, fidgeting nervously with the tassel of the cushion against which he is leaning. 'And—er—no doubt it seems to you as if it were the easiest thing in the world to go upstairs and tell that girl she ought to marry you; but—— But, as I have already hinted to you, my niece is a stranger to me, and—er—slight as my acquaintance with her is, it has already occurred to me that—er—she is a sort of person who would be—er—rather difficult to argue with—to—to—er—persuade against her will!'

'Yes, quite so. I fully understand. Indeed, that is one of her charms!' says Hume shortly.

Mr. Blake stares at him as if uncertain whether he can be in his senses.

'Oh—er—is that how you look at it?' says he. 'I

confess it didn't occur to me—about her charm lying in her obstinacy, I mean. But everyone has a different looking-glass, of course. To me, I confess, she has appeared as a trifle headstrong, eh ?

‘Very headstrong,’ says Mr. Hume, nodding his own head as though wholly satisfied, and indeed as if rather pleased than otherwise with Mr. Blake for having hit off another charm.

‘Ah,’ says that latter gentleman, giving up the contest, and subsiding into his chair.

‘You will speak to her ?’ asks Hume, pressing the question.

‘Ye-es, yes, I suppose so. I suppose it is my duty,’ says poor Mr. Blake, with a weary sigh.

Feeling delay will but render matters worse, he makes a step towards the door—hesitates half-way—moves on again—hesitates once more, and with a final reproachful glance at Hume leaves the room.

## CHAPTER IX.

‘And this new loving sets the groove  
Too much the way of loathing.’

VERY slowly Mr. Blake ascends the staircase to beard this new-found niece in his own drawing-room. A most unlovely task. The new-found niece, pacing up and down the room with rapid steps, and raging impatience in her beautiful eyes, turns upon him at once :

‘Well, have you heard of an earlier train?’ demands she.

‘No, no, my dear ; I am afraid you must wait until the evening.’

‘Has he gone away, then?’ cries she, pausing in her rapid walk to and fro in the holland-shrouded room to ask this evidently all-important question.

‘No,’ says Mr. Blake again. ‘And, considering all

things, perhaps it would be as well that he should not go.'

'What things?' sharply.

'Now, now, be calm; pray be calm,' says Mr. Blake. 'With time we shall be able to go into everything. You will pardon my saying it, but you seem to me to be deplorably wanting in tranquillity.'

'Tranquil! I'm not going to be tranquil where he is concerned!' cries she, making a very decided little noise upon the carpet with her foot. 'Do you mean to say you have come here only to say that? As to his going, I hope he will go at once and for ever.'

'Sit down, I entreat you to sit down!' says Mr. Blake. 'The sitting position is always conducive to repose both of mind and body, and it is necessary that you should be composed before I start the subject in my mind. The very objectionable manner in which you now tread the room has the effect of—er—reducing my mind almost to a jelly.'

Miss Delaney, stopping short in her perambulations, surveys him steadily.

'Poor mamma!' says she sadly, as if her mind has wandered to the mournful past. And then—'You

are her brother, aren't you?' She may have meant nothing, but this wind-up to the original remark is, to say the least of it, unfortunate.

'Yes,' says Mr. Blake grimly. 'And now sit down, if you please—if you can,' more grimly still, 'and let me explain to you one or two things of which you appear to be remarkably ignorant.'

He explains the one or two things in a manner all his own, leaving Nan nearly as wise at the end as at the beginning of his discourse. That Hume wants to marry her is the one thing clear, but, after all, she had known that a long time ago—such a long time! It seems to her as though years had elapsed since her enforced crossing of the water between Ireland and England—between the hour he had first proposed to her and this.

'He is most sincerely in earnest. He really desires to marry you; and his settlements—his settlements are magnificent — magnificent!' says Mr. Blake, raising his hands. He feels bent on bringing this unpleasant business to a propitious end.

'Settlements! Bother his settlements!' says Miss Delaney, with startling vehemence. She has pushed



back her chair, and now stands facing her uncle with anger in her eyes. 'Do you think I care about settlements?'

'Not care—not care about——you are a dreadful girl,' says Mr. Blake with the utmost placidity, and yet rather as if a slight hurricane had arisen to blow away his breath. 'Shocking!—shocking! Really, you know, if your aunt heard you she would be horrified. And as for Lydia! I am so thankful Lydia is not present!' The immaculate Lydia is his daughter. 'The whole affair is so irregular, so—so indiscreet, to put it mildly, that——'

'Pouf!' says Miss Delaney, turning a truly unregenerate shoulder to him. 'You have lived too long out of Ireland, uncle! You have forgotten how to separate the accidental from the imprudent.'

'You seem to have forgotten something, too,' says Mr. Blake, quite smartly for him. 'The accidental is what Mr. Hume bases his defence upon, and——'

'Don't mention him!' cries she with a frown; 'he has nothing to do with anything accidental. He is a designer of the deepest dye!'

'No! You wrong him there,' says Mr. Blake de-

cidedly. 'I must be mad, indeed, to doubt his sincerity. That unfortunate man——' Here he pauses and stares at her fixedly, as if trying to explain to himself the extraordinary fact to which he is about to give voice. 'He—he seems positively to be very much in love with you !'

'No?' says Nan, wrath and amusement taking equal sides within her. 'You are sure? You are perfectly certain you haven't made a mistake?'

'I really think I have not. Your astonishment does not surprise me, but I assure you I honestly believe he does think himself in love with you,' says Mr. Blake, in all good faith.

An inclination to laugh catches hold of Nan, and another inclination, too, namely, to arise and deal heavily with Mr. Blake, to shake him out of his solemn placidity.

'I suppose I should feel honoured,' says she steadily enough, but with a little tightening at her throat, 'and yet—— Are you going back to him?' turning upon Mr. Blake with a light in her eyes that frightens him. 'If so, tell him from me that his handsome settlements may be bestowed upon some

other girl with his love, both of which I despise! And tell him, too, that his insulting proposals will never be listened to by me!

‘I think you should hesitate before sending that message,’ says Mr. Blake.

‘And why? See, now—there you are—my uncle,’ says she, blazing round at him. ‘And yet you would advise me to marry a man who has played such a part as he has. Such a dishonourable part!’

‘It is precisely because I am your uncle that I press the matter on your consideration,’ says Mr. Blake. ‘One should—er—always consider the name.’

‘Name?’ echoes she a little helplessly—it is plain even to him that she does not follow him, that she has not grasped his meaning.

‘Yes, our name! You’—slowly—‘should take into consideration that you are one of us. You should be therefore, careful of your good name.’

‘My good name! mine?’ says she quickly. She pauses, her eyes on his as if not knowing—as if struggling with a growing and most hateful suspicion. And then, all at once, the hot, cruel blood mounts to

her cheeks, and she stands before him as one might who has been suddenly and treacherously stabbed to her heart's core! 'Mine!' she says again, as if refusing to understand, and then, 'Do you mean to tell me'—leaning heavily upon the table near her, and compelling her uncle to meet her eyes—'that you think they will talk about me at home? Discuss me—say evil things of me? That they will gossip about me? You believe, perhaps, that some of those in our neighbourhood will look coldly on me when I go back, and will think—think that—— Oh, speak, speak!' cries she in a sort of frenzy. 'Do you really think that I shall be matter for town-talk after this?'

'Well, really, my dear,' begins Mr. Blake, in his monotone, 'considering all the unlucky circumstances of the case, I—I fear——'

'I never thought of that, never,' says the girl, in a frozen tone. 'Oh, that they should talk about me! Canvass my motives! Dissect me, as it were! Oh, it is horrible, horrible!' She stops short in her agitated walk up and down the room, and turns her eyes on Mr. Blake. 'Now you can see,' she says slowly, but with terrible passion, 'how much I owe him!'

‘You exaggerate matters, I assure you, you do,’ says Mr. Blake nervously. ‘As for him, I know little of him, of course ; but from what I have seen, I——’

‘Don’t seek to plead his cause with me,’ interrupts she coldly. ‘You would only lose your time. I understand all you would tell me. There is nothing more to be said. I——’ she pauses suddenly, and raising her hands, presses them convulsively against her eyes. ‘See here,’ she cries with a wild sob, ‘go to him—go at once—and tell him from me that I consent ; that I will marry him. He has gained his point. He was determined to force me into this marriage, and he has succeeded.’

‘I really think, if the idea is so repugnant to you, that the matter might perhaps be arranged without this marriage taking place,’ begins Mr. Blake rather vaguely.

‘No, I will have no arrangement. I will not consent to live down a scandal ; that is how they usually put it, isn’t it?’ says she with a curl of her lips. ‘I will make an end of it at once, and for ever. They can gossip about me after my marriage, if they

will ; and he shall bear that with me, but I will not go back to Rathmore as Nan Delaney. There, go to him, and tell him I insist on marrying him !

‘ I think you have come to a very wise decision,’ says Mr. Blake.

‘ I dare say. Wise decisions are always full of bitterness to the deciders. Are you going? Oh, don’t! Oh, stay!’ cries she, holding out her hands in a sort of agony. ‘ Oh, must I marry him? There—go! Yes, yes, I know it. It has to be done. But tell him this,’ flaming round at poor Mr. Blake as though he were Hume in person, ‘ that though I am going to marry him I hate and despise him. Don’t forget the “despise”!’

‘ I hardly see how I could say that to him,’ says Mr. Blake. ‘ Would you not reconstruct that message? You might consider me a little. How am I to go to that young man and say to him the dreadful things you have just now said to me?’

‘ I shall not unsay them,’ says she stonily. ‘ Go! And when you have explained things to him, tell him I want to see him!’

## CHAPTER X.

‘What shall be said between us here?’

DOWNSTAIRS, then, goes the luckless man again to impart information, for the second time. How he will be received by Hume is a thought that renders his step slow. That young man, hearing the door open, looks round excitedly from the window overlooking a dusty garden, through which he has been idly watching the quarrels of four dilapidated town sparrows.

‘Well?’ exclaims he eagerly. ‘You saw her? Do you think there is any hope? In time will she consent to my proposal?’

‘She has consented,’ says Mr. Blake, sinking wearily into an arm-chair.

‘Eh!’

‘She says she will marry you now, at once——’

‘She says—— Oh, it was sarcasm, of course! She was indignant at my sending her the message, and——’

‘She was indignant, certainly,’ says Mr. Blake in a tone of deep fatigue. ‘She was, indeed, rather more than that. As far as I could see, she was in a violent rage. But for all that she is prepared to marry you, as soon as the matter can possibly be arranged.’

‘Oh, you must be mistaken,’ says Hume. ‘You—you don’t know her as well as I do; you don’t understand her; I thought, perhaps, in a month or so, when my sister had had time to persuade her as to the advisability of the step, that she might say yes to my proposition. But to do it at once, at a word from you. My dear sir, believe me, she has deceived you, not wilfully, but certainly. Would you mind going up to her again, and asking her to——’

‘I should. I shan’t go up again. On that point I am not to be moved,’ says Mr. Blake, bringing his hand, in quite a forcible manner for him, down on the table near him. ‘I have suffered a good deal, sir, because of you; I decline to suffer any more. And,



as to that girl, I would not face her again for any bribe you could offer. Besides,' toning down a little, 'there is no necessity. I am not such a dullard as you seem to imagine. I know my niece is in earnest. I could not mistake the misery it caused her to consent to be your wife !'

Hume starts backwards as if stung.

'Does it make her so unhappy?' asks he in a choked tone. 'She said——'

'More than I shall repeat. I have heard both sides of this deplorable story, and, though she is my niece, and you are nothing to me, I am bound to say that I hold you free of intentional wrong. But you are bound to remember, sir, to your life's end, that you have placed her in a position (unwittingly, I hope—I think) from which it would be difficult for her to rescue herself, without agreeing to this marriage.'

'I am not likely to forget it,' says Hume in a low voice. 'I thank you much, Mr. Blake, for your belief in me.'

'See that it is not misplaced,' says Mr. Blake earnestly. 'She is very sore at heart ; you must bear with her ; if, indeed, you make her your wife, you will

have to endure many things. It is a great risk for both of you.'

'I accept it,' says Hume, who is very pale. 'That I love her, sir, is, I hope, plain to you.'

'Well, well!' says the older man, with a sigh. He had perhaps heard a good deal about love in his time. Then, 'Her father must be told.'

'Her father is a nonentity. A selfish porer over old books,' says Hume shortly. 'You, in this situation, have been more a father to her in five minutes than he has been in a lifetime. He can be told afterwards.'

'And in the meantime?'

'She will stay with my sister, Lady Despard.'

'You seem to me to be a singularly sanguine person,' says Mr. Blake. 'Your sister—do you think when you have explained everything to her, as'—slowly—'of course you will—do you think she will still be ready to receive my niece, to help on a marriage between you and a penniless girl?'

'Yes!' says Hume, with decision.

'I hope so; I hope so, indeed,' says Mr. Blake, with all the air of one who sees breakers ahead.

‘Well, there is no more to be said, I think, except that Nan (that is her name, I think?) wishes to see you.’

‘To see me—now?’

‘Yes. That was what she gave me to understand, at all events.’

‘Where is she?’ says Hume, taking a step forward, as if to seek her forthwith.

‘Don’t be so precipitate! Don’t, I implore you!’ says Mr. Blake, lifting his hands in expostulation. ‘Good heavens! what was ever gained by undue haste? And as for her, I think perhaps you had better prepare yourself for—for—well, for a good deal,’ says he lamely, nervously. ‘She—she strikes me as being a person of rather lively manners, to say the least of them. She will say many things to you that you will not care to hear. She——’

‘And have I not deserved them?’ cries Hume, now with his hand on the door.

‘Will that indisputable fact make them the pleasanter?’ asks Mr. Blake, horribly downright.

‘It must; it shall!’ says Hume, tearing open the door and rushing upon his fate.

‘Bless me, what a volcano!’ says Mr. Blake, thus left behind. Rising, he marches dejectedly up and down the room. ‘What is to be the end of it?’ soliloquizes he. ‘Will they spend the day here? Shall I have to pay court to them all the long daylight hours? It is really cruel of Dora to go away and subject me to these descents. I feel as if I were buried alive beneath this one. Good heavens! I hope they won’t tear each other in pieces. A tragedy beneath one’s roof, with blood in it, would finish me outright.’

Meantime, Hume has gone upstairs and entered the room where Nan is. Upon the threshold he stops short, cut to the heart at the sight before him, at that slender, lovely, most forlorn figure lying prone upon a table, sobbing as if its heart would break.

‘I am sorry it is as bad as this,’ begins he haltingly. ‘If you could only——’

At his first words she springs to her feet and confronts him.

‘If I could only do what?’ she cries. ‘Is there really anything I can do to escape from you? Any-

thing that will set me free, both from you and slanderous tongues? Is there?’

He is silent.

‘If you know of anything, if there is any smallest idea of the sort in your mind, oh,’ with a heavy sob, ‘I do beseech you tell it me!’

‘Why should you care so much for the absurd tittle-tattle of a small country town?’ says he evasively, his eyes on the ground.

‘How should I not care? And, besides, it is not altogether of myself I am thinking. There are the girls; Penelope would be made miserable a hundred times a day by unkind insinuations about me. And later on it might perhaps reflect on them. Absurd as you call it, still those women at home have tongues that can sting; and though I could defy them, knowing how unjust it all was, I should, for all that, be made unhappy by them. I could not endure it; I will not. Can you not imagine how nasty Julia would be, for example? But,’ earnestly, ‘if you could think of something that would reduce them all to silence!’

‘Well, I have thought of something,’ says he slowly.

‘Yes ; well ?’ breathlessly.

‘Your uncle told you of it. See here,’ putting up his hand to stop the rush of anger he sees upon her face, ‘what is the use of discussing the matter further ? There is no way to escape the gossip of your county except by marrying me.’

‘Oh !’ cries she, and that is all just then ; but there is strong meaning in the simple ejaculation—hatred, contempt, despair.

Stung by it, he turns on her.

‘Then don’t marry me !’ he says vehemently. ‘This enforced journey of yours to England with me is not so unexampled, or altogether unpardonable an affair that you need wreck your life upon it. Surely the unkind comments of your so-called friends would be a lesser evil than taking my name ?’

‘It is an easy matter for you to argue,’ says she, with bitter reproach. ‘You have got to endure nothing.’

‘I have got to endure your most unjust anger.’

‘Unjust !’

‘Cruelly unjust. But I know there is little use in trying to convince you of that at present. If,’ speak-

ing more gently now, and regarding her wistfully, 'if you will indeed trust yourself to me, Nan—if I am to believe the message your uncle brought me, I swear to you that you will never regret it!'

'No, but you shall,' passionately—'I promise you that! I promise it to myself also. Why'—flashing round at him—'why do you want to marry me? What is there in me that you should care to make me your wife?'

'You know,' replies he sullenly, 'I love you.'

'Love! Is that love, that can gain no return but hatred? that can create in the heart of her you profess to love only contempt and scorn? Oh, do not believe it! This marriage will make you a thousand times more unhappy than it will make me.'

'I am content to make trial of it,' says he steadily.

At this a little passionate cry breaks from her.

'Oh, when you look like that—when you speak so, I—— Do you know what makes me dislike you so much? It is because you do not seem even sorry about it all; it is because I believe that even if you did know a way out of it, a way that would leave me free, you would not tell me of it. You look as

though you were determined to keep me to this marriage.'

'That is how I feel,' says Hume slowly, yet as if breathing with difficulty.

Perhaps he hardly means quite what he has said; but her manner, her glance, her whole air, has enraged him.

There is a pause.

'Well!' says she at last, with a long, long sigh, and a change of tone that leaves her voice cold and soft and menacing. 'So be it then; it is all over. I shall marry you, but I warn you beforehand that I shall make you repent this hour. I'll take your name; I'll go through the ceremony of marriage with you, but a greater mockery than that ceremony will be never yet was known. I shall neither love, nor honour, nor obey you. Honour you! you!'

She stops here, not from want of words, apparently, but from excess of passion.

It is this unlucky moment that Mr. Blake chooses to put a cautious head inside the door. He has grown alarmed at the length of time that has elapsed since Hume went upstairs.



‘If I might suggest——’ begins he.

‘Go away!’ cries Nan sharply, severely, who is quivering in every nerve, and who is making a desperate battle with herself to refrain from the humiliation of tears—tears that are dangerously near her.

Mr. Blake, as if pulled by a string from outside, precipitately disappears and goes slowly down the staircase once more, mopping his head as he goes. His poor head! When was it so muddled as it is to-day? And what is to be the end of it all?

‘I suppose I shall have to dine with her,’ says the wretched man, with a profound sigh.

Meantime the two in the drawing-room are standing glaring at each other.

‘You shall honour me in time,’ says Hume at last, with an icy determination. ‘You may never love and never obey me; but I shall compel you to honour me.’

There is something in his voice that arrests her attention. It neither frightens nor subdues her, but it rouses her curiosity so far, that, bent on analyzing

this new development of his, she forgets to thrust another spear at him.

‘My sister will call on you to-morrow,’ he says, after awhile. ‘She will ask you to stay with her until our marriage is accomplished. I should wish you to accept her invitation.’

‘Should you?’ says Nan simply, who has now got over her astonishment, and has placed the development. ‘Well, that decides it, then. I shan’t accept it. My uncle’s house is naturally the best home for me.’

‘Not under the circumstances. If you wish to avoid the scandal you so dread, you had better let all the world know that my sister has received you before our marriage.’

‘Our? Oh,’ cries she, ‘how I hate to be connected with you in any way! Well, I shall hate your sister——’

‘Because she is mine,’ bitterly.

‘For that reason alone, if there is no other; and I shall not stay with her.’

‘I beg you to do this thing,’ says Hume, ‘for your own sake entirely. It will give a correct colouring to the whole affair.’

‘And save your wife from being talked about,’ says she recklessly. ‘Well, I shan’t do it. I shall not help you in any way. You say you are determined to marry me. You can do so, and take the consequences.’

‘You think to prevent me from marrying you, and to force me into showing you another way out of your difficulties,’ says Hume. ‘But you overrate my abilities. I know of no other way. And whether you defy the public or not, I am still equally bent on marrying you.’

‘You are bent on your own ruin then,’ says she, with a quietude that contrasts oddly with her late anger. ‘There, go! I am tired.’

He moves towards the door, but suddenly changing his mind, comes back to her, and seizes her hands. There is great misery, greater love in his eyes.

‘Nan,’ says he, ‘you told me you loved no one else. You told me that, with so true a face that I cannot, I dare not disbelieve it. Tell me so again.’

‘I’ll tell you more,’ says she vehemently. ‘That now it seems to me I hate all the world. But above all, I hate you!’

‘I would rather you hated me than that you loved another,’ replies he passionately. He presses her hands hard for a moment, then drops them and leaves the room.

## CHAPTER XI.

‘No, vain, alas ! th’ endeavour  
From bonds so sweet to sever ;  
    Poor wisdom’s chance  
    Against a glance  
Is now as weak as ever.’

To be able to meet misfortune with an impassive countenance is given to but few ; Lady Despard, however, though unequal to the task of entirely hiding her chagrin, so far managed to restrain her real feeling that her brother never quite knew how far she regarded his intended marriage as a social failure. It was a dreadful blow to her. She had been an ambitious woman always, and when she had settled herself in life, in a manner creditable in the highest degree to her wisdom, had found herself full of a desire to range Hume in such wise as should make him a little power in his own county. Money he did

not want, though more money is always to be desired, and Hume was as good a name as you could find anywhere. But a title. It would be such a desirable thing that a young heir to Hume Castle should have a Lady Elizabeth or a Lady Hildegarde for his mother. She would not, indeed, have George marry for title, but she would have him go where titles were, and——

Now all her hopes are dead. Of course she has heard of the Delaney girls ; a word here, a sentence there. His letters now and again had presented them to her in one light or another, but had never been definite enough to destroy the idea she had formed of them as highly-coloured, loud-laughing, romping Irish girls. Lady Despard had never been in Ireland in her life, and her knowledge of Irish manners and people was strictly limited to such wild accounts as we now and again hear disseminated amongst intelligent English groups.

Is it too late ? is her first thought, when Hume has brought his narrative—a rather sorry one—to an end. Is there no way out of the difficulty ? A suspicion of melancholy about Hume has suggested to her that

perhaps he is at heart regretful of the fatal step he is about to take, but that honour compels him to stifle all token of it. To try to persuade him to abandon a cause in which he feels himself bondsman to duty would, she knows, be worse than useless; but surely she would not be doing her duty were she to refrain from striving with all her might to extricate him from this terrible dilemma. There must be a means of escape somewhere, a *viâ media* that will lead him to safety, and leave him to espouse the titled damsel she has already secretly selected for him.

With all her worldliness, a strong and enduring love for her brother—who is a few years her junior—is the chief passion of her life. For her husband, an old man and kind, she has the deepest respect mingled with a calm regard, but for George her love is sincere as it is earnest. She is a woman of a strong character, not easily moved, suave and delicate in manner, and very carefully cultured, but cold and a trifle unsympathetic to woes in general; a woman so almost pretty that a perfect toilette at all times makes her appear so, and with a charming smile

that is as cultivated as her mind. Tall and slight and still young enough to hold her own with those much younger than her, she is still sufficiently like Hume to preclude the idea of her being handsome. Like his, her eyes are singularly intelligent, and indeed in many ways she resembles him trait for trait—in the touch of hauteur that marks the turn of her neck, the unmistakable distinction that belongs to voice and movement, and in the whole air of aristocratic breeding that renders her the exceptional woman that she so undoubtedly is. As I have said, to the careful observer, disrobing her as it were, and leaving her without the adjuncts of an irreproachable toilette, she would certainly present herself as not noticeably good-looking, but at no time would she be within the pale of ugliness. Here she has the advantage of her brother, who can lay claim to not the smallest share of beauty.

‘Is it too late?’ says she, in her low *traînante* voice, raising her head at last, and regarding her brother earnestly. ‘Can I not do something? It is an unfortunate story, certainly, but most things are capable of being placed. If you would trust it to me,



I believe I could find you a way out of it, consistent with every good feeling.'

'No, no. It is too late,' quickly.

'Oh, surely not! There is always time. And it is so serious. One's whole life! She might come and stay with me, for example. That would prevent a great deal of talk. I could arrange it for her, I think.'

'Impossible!' rather more sharply. 'I have spoken to her uncle.'

'Even that might be settled. I could offer to take her about with me this autumn. And—and if she is as—as presentable as you seem to hint at, I dare say I could manage a marriage for her before the spring. If you will leave it to me, as I said just now, I feel sure I——'

'Perhaps,' interrupts Hume, who has grown rather white, and is evidently laying a great constraint upon himself—'Perhaps it is as well to say at once that I don't want a way out of it.'

'Oh!' says Lady Despard, in a curious sort of way; after which there is silence between them for awhile. Then—

‘Is she pretty?’ asks she, in a low tone, thoroughly disheartened.

‘Very,’ slowly. ‘Lovely, indeed, would better express her.’

‘And—and——’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ impatiently. ‘Of course she is that. The Delaneys are one of the oldest and finest families in Ireland. Don’t make a mistake about that.’

‘But—forgive me, George—if things are all that you say, why are you so unhappy about this matter? Why do you so evidently shrink from—try not to mind me, dear—your marriage with her?’

‘She does not care for me,’ replies he shortly. As he speaks he turns abruptly away, and stares into the fire burning in the grate.

This time Lady Despard says nothing. An expression of intense grief, mingled with haughty indignation, darkens her face. With a little light but abrupt movement she shuts up her fan, and lets it fall into her lap. Then, as though a sudden thought has come to her, her brow clears; here, perhaps, is a sudden lifting out of all her difficulty.

‘Is there anyone else?’ she asks, bending eagerly forward. ‘Oh that there may be!’

‘No,’ says Hume.

‘No?’ She repeats his word as if unable to believe in it. Once again a frown gathers on her face. That anyone—anyone should dare to regard lightly an alliance with her brother! And this one! A little, unsophisticated Irish girl, to whom the world of society is a sealed book—who would probably not know how to conduct herself if placed in a fashionable drawing-room! That she should be blind to the advantages to be gained by a marriage with a Hume!

‘At least,’ says Hume very sadly, as if bound to correct himself against his will, ‘I think not.’ Alas! the key to a great part of his misery lies in these words. He can only hope not. Always when he would most desperately thrust it from him, the face of Boyle Ffrench presents itself to his inward vision.

‘What! You only think it! Good heavens, what is it you are going to do?’ cries Lady Despard vehemently, forgetful of her carefully-acquired suavity in a moment that touches the welfare of the one she

loves best on earth. 'Think—consider, I beseech you, before it is too late. Try to see what a mistake you are about to make of your whole life. And that girl—— I do entreat you, George, to go well into it, before taking such an irrevocable step. It is as cruel to her as to you.'

'I tell you she is taking this step of her own free will. That unhappiness will come of it, I know,' almost fiercely; 'but for me, I hope; not for her.'

'For her as surely as for you. Can she separate from you? except under the most disgraceful—— Oh, George, do think! You should think now for both. What sort of a married life do you expect to have?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' recklessly. 'Not worse than a lot of other fellows, I dare say.'

'And you can contemplate it thus coolly; you must be mad,' says she, her delicate face flushing.

'That idea has occurred to myself,' retorts he, with a half laugh.

'Then why not rouse yourself, and throw off this thrall?'

'I suppose the madness has gone too deep for that.'

‘She will not forgive you,’ says she, after a pause.

‘I am afraid I can’t contradict that,’ replies he coldly, still with that sneering token of mirth.

‘It is inexplicable to me, that you should so far have sunk yourself in an affair hopeless from the first. If this girl never cared for you, why should you—— I confess I cannot understand how——’

‘There is nothing to understand!’ exclaims he, with an uncontrollable burst of impatience, putting an end to her halting speech. ‘I have fallen in love with her, that is all. It is a story so old, that it should not arouse surprise in any mind. It has gone so far with me that—well, I could not give her up.’ He walks over to the window and stands there, motionless, his back turned to her.

‘If that had been said at first,’ begins Lady Despard a little stiffly.

‘I know. It would have been fairer, honester. But sometimes it is so hard to speak. Well, you understand how it is with me now. I am content to marry her since she has willed it so, knowing she feels no faintest liking for me.’

‘You are a brave man!’ says Lady Despard in a

curious tone that has something of contempt in it. To her, who has never known love, this abject surrender of one's self suggests only cowardice. Why can he not rise and fight against this ignoble passion, and crush it out of all shape?

'Not so brave after all,' wilfully ignoring her real meaning, and taking her words in apparent good faith. 'Sometimes I have thought——'

He pauses.

'Well?' regarding him with a keen glance.

'That perhaps, in time, she may learn to regard me with kinder eyes.'

There is something so melancholy, so entirely without hope, in these hopeful words that Lady Despard's disappointment sinks out of sight, and all her heart yearns towards her brother. So kind, so honourable, so true a man! A man, not handsome truly, but sufficiently distinguished in appearance to be looked at twice wherever he goes. A gentleman always, and with a heart so tender—truly any woman might regard him with kindly eyes!

'She may indeed,' cries she heartily, a warmth in

her tone that had not been in it until now. Hume, hearing, comes back to her, his eyes lighting.

‘Ah,’ says he, feeling her once more in touch with him, ‘now that is kind! You will help me? You will do for me what you can?’

‘And that?’ asks she, smiling, and feeling she is letting herself in for perhaps terrible things.

‘I want you to call on her. To make her your friend—to induce her to come and stay with you, until the marriage is accomplished.’

‘You wish her to be married from my house, in effect,’ says Lady Despard with a sigh. ‘Well, as it seems a settled thing, let us by all means give it a brilliant colour to the world. There is hardly anybody in town at present, but I can get two or three socially important people to come to your wedding breakfast. I shall have to tell a lie or two to account for the excessive haste, and I hope,’ with an irrepressible tinge of irony, ‘that Miss Delaney is not too high-souled to refrain from exposing me. Now, when am I to call?’

‘To-morrow, if you will. But please do not talk to her like that.’

‘I shall, I dare say, be able to control myself,’ says she, with a slight laugh. ‘The address is——? Very good. One last word. Is she difficult?’

‘She—well—it is possible,’ says Hume desperately, ‘that she, too, might talk to you—“like that.”’

‘Oh, George!’ says Lady Despard. She keeps her lips determinedly together after this one protestation, but her thoughts run riot. A profound pity for him fills her breast. Ignorant, Irish, unsophisticated, dead to the laws of society, worse than indifferent to him, without a penny, and—with a violent temper! Oh, poor George!



## CHAPTER XII.

‘ You must love me, albeit the world I offend  
By impertinence, whimsies, conceit.’

FULL of these settled views as to Nan’s appearance, manners and so forth, she awaits with a discontent bordering on horror that young lady’s entrance. Sitting in the cold solemnity of the drawing-room in Mr. Blake’s house, draped in its Holland grave-clothes, miserable forebodings about her brother’s future fill her mind. One thing alone sustains her: the hope that perhaps she may, by argument judiciously placed, induce this vulgar young person to relinquish her claim upon him.

The opening of the door drives her from the last finishing-touches she is giving to her plan to look at ‘ that Irish girl.’

Involuntarily she rises to her feet as Nan, pale, but

perfectly composed, comes up the room. Is *this* the 'ignorant, Irish, unsophisticated,' designing young person of her imagination? Good heavens! what grace, what distinction, what—— After all, she had not been entirely in the wrong. *What* a temper!

Nan's eyes are indeed flashing, and, set in the extreme pallor of her face, look black. Lady Despard had thought she would have been the one to commence any cold introduction, but she finds herself mistaken.

'You are Mr. Hume's sister,' says Nan very gravely, and with just sufficient civility to prevent all thought of discourtesy. 'It is very kind of you to call.'

'Oh no,' says Lady Despard with a little smile, that to her astonishment she finds to be conciliatory. 'My brother can always command me, and his interest in you——'

'As for that——' interrupts Miss Delaney, not rudely, but as if unable to listen to the termination of the sentence. She pauses and looks straight into Lady Despard's eyes, hardly consciously as it seems to the latter. It is evident she is making up her

mind to make a bold dash at the detested matter that has brought them together, and Lady Despard looks at her, and, waiting for her to speak, grows sure that the girl is not only angry, but terribly unhappy; something resembling commiseration troubles her breast, and she would perhaps have spoken soothing words of some sort, but that Nan, having found the thought needful, gives voice to it, and lays a short, concise account of her presence here and its consequences before Lady Despard.

‘I don’t know what he has told you,’ she winds up at last, her earnest eyes still fixed on her visitor.

‘Not quite what you have told me, and I think you misjudge him,’ says Lady Despard gently, because of her sudden sympathy for this unknown lovely creature, but always with a determination to support her brother.

‘Naturally,’ with a hopeless air, ‘you are his sister.’

‘Don’t misjudge me, too. Believe me, I could be just—were he in the wrong—even though he is my brother.’

‘He tells me,’ says Nan, as if hardly heeding her,

‘that I must either go home, and endure the talk, the scandal—or marry him? Has he told you that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I shall not go home.’

‘Which means that you will marry him?’

‘I can’t bear to hear it put into words by—by another,’ says Nan, with a fierceness that might have offended Lady Despard, but that her glance is fixed on the tears in the girl’s eyes.

‘My dear, consider. Is it so terrible a thing? You will say again, no doubt, “Naturally, you are his sister;” but surely George is a person to be loved, not hated. And he loves you so.’ Once again she is puzzled to find that she is positively advocating the cause of a marriage that only half an hour ago was abomination to her.

‘That is my misfortune,’ says Nan coldly. Then, her natural graciousness reproaching her, she says quickly, ‘I should not speak like this to you. If he were anyone else’s brother, it would be easier to tell you how it is with me; but you have come, and you must be told about it. And——’

‘Have you quite made up your mind to marry him?’ asks Lady Despard abruptly.

‘Quite.’

Lady Despard had come primed and loaded with arguments to induce the ignorant, etc., young woman to renounce this idea; but now, somehow, all her grandly prepared sentences fail her, and she sits mute, not knowing what to say. How if by word of hers George should lose this beautiful girl? Would he ever forgive her? And surely, in time, as he himself said, a creature so sweet, so sensitive, so plainly lovable, might be brought to——

‘I shock you,’ says Nan, who has misinterpreted her silence. ‘But I could not go home after this. I should only make things difficult for the others—the girls, my sisters, I mean—I should make them unhappy.’

‘Are you sure you will not make them more unhappy by thus sacrificing yourself for them?’

‘Oh, don’t mistake me,’ says Nan eagerly. ‘I am doing this thing for myself. You must understand that. And,’ with an air of weary discontent, ‘I do so hate talking about it.’

‘I can quite believe that. Well, to change the subject, what principally brought me here to-day is to carry you back with me.’

‘Thank you, but——’

‘Better have no buts in this case ; I assure you it will be wise of you to accept this plan of mine, even though I can quite see that it may be unpleasant to you.’

‘Surely my uncle’s house——’

‘No,’ gently. ‘Under the circumstances, the house of your future sister-in-law will be more desirable.’ Getting up, Lady Despard moves nearer to the girl, and lays a light hand upon her shoulder. ‘Why should you disappoint me in this matter?’ she asks very kindly.

‘Your brother—— He is staying with you?’ asks Nan in a low tremulous tone, her eyes on the ground.

‘Not from this moment, if you are to be my guest, and if you prefer his being elsewhere. Still, if you could bring yourself to——’

‘I could not,’ sharply. ‘I refuse to see him again until—— When can we be married?’ turning abruptly to Lady Despard.

‘The day after to-morrow, I have heard from George.’

‘Oh, so soon!’

‘So, you see,’ says Lady Despard a little hurriedly, ‘that you will only have to stay with me for quite a short time. You will say yes?’

‘Very well; yes,’ says Nan rather forlornly, rising to leave the room. ‘I was writing to Penelope before you came. I suppose you want me to go back with you now. Can you wait until I finish my letter?’

‘Certainly, certainly,’ cries Lady Despard briskly, having gained her points.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, Nan Delaney has ceased to exist, and Annette Marion Hume reigns in her stead.

### CHAPTER XIII.

‘Don’t listen to tales of his bounty,  
Don’t hear what they say of his birth,  
Don’t look at his seat in the county,  
Don’t calculate what he is worth.’

‘OH! Poor, poor, poor Nan! Oh, what a cruel shame to purposely carry her off like that, and compel her at the dagger’s point to marry him! He’s a regular brigand,’ says Gladys with conviction, when she too had read the letter from Nan (that had been interrupted by Lady Despard), handing it back to Penelope.

‘Judging him by what she says—and we must believe her—he is a wicked man,’ responds Penelope, who has sunk into a chair, and seems incapable of ever getting out of it again.

‘Good heavens! What a monster! Knowing



that she did not care for him—and she didn't, she quite made up her mind that she wouldn't—you remember, Pen?—he still, with deliberation, mind you, stole her. Oh, poor darling! How miserable she is! Can nothing be done to help her to stop this hateful marriage?

‘Nothing. You see the date of her letter, and the day she mentions for the wedding?’ Here Penelope stops, and gives a great start, and glances at the clock. ‘She is being married this moment!’ cries she, as if the world has indeed come to an end.

‘Oh no! Oh, don’t say that, Penelope!’

‘Look at the clock!’ tragically; ‘eleven, she says, and it is on the stroke of eleven now.’

‘It is all over!’ breathes Gladys solemnly, after which an appropriate silence follows.

It is broken by the entrance of Murphy, who, tired of waiting for a summons, has come in to take away the remains of a breakfast abnormally prolonged. Why has the usual bell not sounded? There is a suspicion of curiosity in the twinkle of Murphy’s eye as he casts a hurried glance at his ‘young ladies.’

Hume’s telegram from Milford had been inefficient

as to the easing of anxiety about Nan in the Delaney household ; and now, seeing Miss Gladys almost in tears, and Miss Penelope as white as the 'dhriven snow,' it is a simple thing to Mr. Murphy to guess that whatever the trouble may be that has fallen on these two fair heads, it has certainly to do with Miss Nan.

Having coughed once or twice, and made a pretence of dropping a plate, all to no avail, he takes his courage in both hands and says bluntly to Penelope :

'I'm thinkin' 'tis throubled ye are, miss, about somethin' or other. Give it a name, me dear, an' ye'll feel a power the betther for it.'

'Oh ! Murphy,' says Penelope, lifting her mournful eyes to his, 'if you were to think for ever, you would never guess what a calamity has befallen us.'

'Miss Penelope, honey, what on airth d'ye mane ?' says Murphy, honestly frightened. These 'children,' as he calls them, are dear to him as his own life. 'Spake, me dear,' says he, 'an' aize an old man's mind. Miss Nan—'tis of her I'm thinkin'.'

The words are hardly out of his mouth, when the two girls—one taking up the other when indignation

assails either of them too severely—lay bare to him the treachery of Hume, the disgraceful audacity that has led to the carrying away of a woman against her will. Was ever Sabine woman worse treated?

‘Isn’t it shocking, Murphy? Don’t you think something could be done? Just fancy! He made up a plot and carried her off against her will, exactly like those horrible people long ago who used to hire coaches and run away with our great-grandmothers, no matter whether they were willing or not. Only he has used a yacht. Can’t he be punished, and poor Nan rescued from him? And who’d have thought it of him, except poor Nan? She always saw through him, didn’t she, Pen? A wolf in sheep’s clothing he was—and is, of course. Oh, poor Nan!’

‘He must—he shall be punished!’ says Penelope. ‘Why don’t you speak, Murphy? Abuse him as much as you like; it will do our hearts good. Why don’t you abuse him, Murphy?’

In truth, it has begun to suggest itself to them that there is something sinister in Mr. Murphy’s silence.

He breaks it.

‘Tell me this. Has he married her?’ asks he at last.

‘Why, of course; that’s the crime,’ says Gladys. ‘It would be all right only for that. But he has crowned his villainy: he has married her, indeed. This very morning. Even now!’

There is something positively awesome in the tone in which she says this, yet it fails to impress the hardened Murphy.

‘Did you ever hear of such effrontery?’ pursues Penelope, taking up the tale; ‘carrying her off—ordering her to marry him—as it were, dragging her to the altar almost by the hair of her head! Oh, Murphy, her pretty head! Oh, don’t you pity her?’ It is quite plain to everyone present that Penelope’s mind’s eye is now beholding Nan being hauled along by her back hair up a marble pavement to the altar rails!

‘Arrah! be aisy,’ says Mr. Murphy, breaking in upon the poetical vision with abominable and terribly unexpected prose. ‘’Tis married she is, ye say, an’ to Misther Hume! Fegs! if that’s

thru, 'tis the finest thing that ever happened to her !'

Had the heavens then and there let fall a thunder-bolt into their midst, it could hardly have created greater consternation than this speech.

'Murphy!' gasps Gladys. She gazes at him with a cautious eye. Perhaps the poor old man has gone off his head; and no wonder, too! Such news is enough to upset the intellect of the sanest.

'You haven't understood, Murphy, have you?' says she very kindly. 'I'll say it all over again. That awful man we used to call Mr. Hume has spirited her away in his yacht against her will, poor darling—even whilst she was entreating and imploring him to let her go; and now he has——'

'Married her, ye tell me. That's the point,' says Mr. Murphy stolidly. 'Sure, I heard every word ye said. An' what more do ye want, may I ask? Faix! 'tis she's the lucky girl this day. I only hope I'll live to see the rest o' ye in half such clover. Ten thousand a year if it's a penny, and an illigant house into the bargain. Lashins and lavins of iverything, an' himself as open-handed as the day.'

‘How dare you speak of him like that!’ cries Gladys, Penelope being speechless with horror. ‘Don’t even mention him. The miscreant!’

‘Arrah now, an’ why wouldn’t I mintion him? It’s proud I am to be able to mintion him, an’ to call him Miss Nan’s husband. Oh, murther! who’d a thought he’d the pluck in him to do it so nately? Wisha, more power to his elbow, say I. Thanks be that I’ve lived to see wan of the poor misthress’s children so decently settled in life!’

‘Oh, Penelope! How can you listen to him? Was there ever such a traitor!’

‘A traithor! What would ye call him a traithor for?’ demands Mr. Murphy, whose flawless conscience prevents his taking this opprobrious epithet to himself. ‘Hasn’t he put her at the head o’ the county? Where’ll the Daunts be now, I wondher; or the O’Gradys, wid their ould carriage that’s as mouldy as thimselves; or the Moncks, wid their musty groom an’ their English ways; an’, with a final burst of pride, ‘where’ll yer aunt be at all at all? Oh, fegs! ’twill be the death of her intirely.’

‘Murphy! Have you no heart? Have you no thought beyond paltry money?’

‘Palthry, is it? That’s where ye show how ignorant ye are; an’ quite right too, for young crathures,’ says Murphy, as if desirous of condoning the folly. ‘But ’tis money makes the mare to go, me dear; an’ that ye’ll learn before ye’re as ould as ould Murphy. But there’s wan o’ ye now that needn’t ever trouble about the odd ha’penny. An’ to think it should be Miss Nan, of all! Miss Nan, wid her thricksy ways. Her “I will” an’ “I won’t,” an’ her promisin’ to-day an’ backin’ out of it to-morrow. Arrah, what respectable man would stand it, I ask ye? Not Hume, any way. Sure, then, she tazed him too far; he just took the law an’ her in his own hands, an’ carried her off an’ married her. There’s a man for ye!’ concludes Mr. Murphy, holding aloft hands of admiration.

Could depravity further go?

‘Murphy, leave the room!’ cries Penelope, with a stamp of her foot. Wrath burns within her. ‘Go, I say! How dare you look at it in that light! Oh, what a bad-hearted old man you are! What a decep-

tion! After all these years, to find you so lost to honourable feeling! I wonder you aren't ashamed to stand there, looking glad—yes, actually glad—at poor Miss Nan's misfortune!

'Tis glad I am, sure enough,' says the old reprobate sturdily. 'If I could see ye all wid a roof as good as the castle over yer heads, I'd die happy.'

'You ought to die unhappy,' says Gladys indignantly. 'Do you want us all to be a prey to—to—burglars? Yes, he is a burglar, Penelope! It isn't a bit of good, your looking at me like that. He certainly burgled Nan. He broke into this house under pretence of friendship, and stole her away. Oh, I wonder what Boyle will say!'

'Say, is it? Who'd care what he'd say?' says Mr. Murphy contemptuously. 'Who's he, I'd like to know, to be lookin' at the likes o' Miss Nan?—Mrs. Hume, I beg her pardin', and a great name it is to be able to give her this day! But as for the cap'n beyant, Misther Ffrench, who'd be givin' him so much as the time o' day? Divil a rap in the world, an' ne'er a sod o' ground of his own. Who'd name him wid Misther Hume, I'd like to know! Och, but



that's the broth of a boy entirely!' giving way a little here to a soft chuckle, and a hug of his body. 'Carried her off, did he? An' ten thousand a year. There won't be wan between this an' Dublin as will be able to howld a candle to her. Divil a wan!' Here this terrible old mercenary begins to cackle!

'I'll tell her every word you have said,' says Gladys, who is now choking with indignation, 'every syllable. Don't think you'll escape. For one thing, don't imagine she'll speak to you when she comes home again.'

'Faix, I wouldn't wondher if she wouldn't spake to anyone when she comes home agin, wid her ten thousand a year, an'——'

'Murphy! Once for all, go away!' interrupts Penelope, pointing tragically to the door. And Murphy, who is already on his way to it with a full tray in his arms, obeys her. When outside he stops short, tray and all, as if overcome with perplexity.

'Glory be—who'd a thought there were so many fools in the world?' says he, shaking his hoary old head. 'But they're young, the crathures—terribly young! They've time to larn. Oh, murther! to

think o' Miss Nan sittin' behind a prancing four!  
'Tis like a good dhrame, it is. Only betther; a dale  
betther, for it sticks to ye!

With a smile of fullest content he carries the tray  
downstairs.

## CHAPTER XIV.

‘Alas ! for that one image fair,  
With all my brightest dreams inwrought,  
That walks beside me everywhere,  
Still whispering—“Forget-me-not.”’

‘WHO is going to tell Boyle ?’ says Gladys, looking at Bartle, who had entered the room as Murphy left it.

‘I’m not,’ says he with a little shrug. ‘If that expressive glance of yours means the answer to that question. I think I see myself ! Boyle’s a regular explosive, warranted to go off on the smallest provocation, and I think he would consider this a big one. But never mind him. The real burning question is, who is to tell father ?’

‘Murphy, of course,’ says Penelope. ‘He deserves it. It will be a good punishment for him, and as he

affects to regard poor Nan's misfortune as a happy event, he will naturally be delighted to go and tell father all about it.'

'Are you going to send him single-handed? Reflect, Penelope. Pulverization is not only an undignified, but a cruel death.'

'Well, you can go with him and protect him,' says Penelope, with an unconscious little laugh that shocks her as it falls on her ears. 'Oh, how can I laugh when poor Nan is so unhappy!' cries she, looking thoroughly ashamed of herself.

'Julia will be glad,' says Gladys shrewdly. 'She will pretend to be shocked at first, but she will be secretly entranced. She is like Murphy—she thinks only of his money.'

'Murphy would never forgive you if he heard that speech. To be considered like the abhorred Julia would indeed be his death-blow.'

'Here is Freddy racing down the avenue,' cries Gladys, who is staring out of the window. 'He looks ever so queer, as if he knew something out of the common. It—it couldn't be our story, could it?'

‘Why, he must have come down by the night mail from Dublin,’ says Penelope, who has grown slightly pink. ‘Could he have heard anything? Freddy, Freddy’—with her head out of the window—‘come in this way.’

Mr. Croker, being still a long way off, might reasonably be forgiven for not hearing; but love, if blind, is always quick to hear, and Croker would have to be deaf indeed before Penelope’s voice failed to reach him.

With a slight assistance from Bartle he swings himself into the room.

‘Not here; we cannot talk here. Come into the schoolroom,’ says Penelope, when she has withdrawn her hand from his warm pressure.

And to the schoolroom they all go; a schoolroom no longer, so much as a general consulting, lounging, idling room for the whole family. A rather terrible old room so far as furniture goes, which is distinctly Philistine. Solid furniture, ‘too, too solid,’ of the early Victorian period. So sturdily put together, indeed, as to preclude all hope of getting rid of either by age or ill-usage.

‘Well?’ says Gladys breathlessly, turning on their visitor.

‘Well to you,’ says he; ‘come, your story first.’

‘It is worse, far worse, than the worst that you could suppose,’ says Penelope; whereupon it is told succinctly, with a touch of temper running through it. ‘Was there ever a man so treacherous?’

‘He didn’t invent the storm,’ says Croker imprudently, letting fall on his own shoulders a good deal of the anger that is in the immediate air.

‘Oh, if you are going to support him!’ says Penelope, with a look of indignant reproach. ‘The storm had nothing to do with it. It is my belief that if there had never been a storm he would still have carried her off.’

‘I don’t think so,’ says Croker gently.

‘But why not? What do you know about it? Ah! if you know anything—— And you do. We all said it as you came up to the house. You heard——’

‘From Hume himself. A very sad letter,’ says Croker.

‘Not so sad as hers. Ah! that is a letter to melt even his heart.’

‘Impossible! he hasn’t one,’ says Gladys.

‘Yet he seemed so kind,’ says Penelope, sighing heavily.

‘How it seems to me is this,’ says Croker, sitting down on a cumbrous sofa, and stretching his legs with all the air of one prepared to argue the matter in question to the death. ‘She’s married; they are married. If this thing has got to be discussed with the people round, don’t forget that Hume is now your sister’s husband, and—your brother.’

‘Never!’ says Gladys warmly. ‘My brother—like Bartle there! The wretched man!’

‘Good heavens! what have I done to be thus designated?’ says Bartle feebly.

‘You know well whom I mean.’

‘Your brother-in-law, at all events.’

‘Well, he shall stay at that point.’

‘What, Freddy! would you advocate his cause?’ says Penelope, turning on him with tears in her eyes.

‘I would say nothing to make any of you unhappy.’

But,' says Croker stoutly, even with those tearful eyes on his, 'I don't believe Hume meant anything so disgraceful as what you hint at.'

'We don't hint; we like to say it right out,' interposes Gladys vehemently. 'We believe that he purposely ran away with our Nan. Hint, indeed!'

'If you are going to take his part,' says Penelope, 'you side with him against us.'

'That is a very hard way of putting it.'

'It is the true way, nevertheless. You have not read Nan's letter—I have. She hates him. She is miserable. Her whole life is spoiled. She assures me it was a purposely designed plan of his.'

'I think she is mistaken,' says Croker, in a low tone, but firm.

'Very well; you can think that if you like. I shall think with Nan,' says Penelope, turning aside, and going over to the lumbering old bookcase that contains rubbish of all kinds.

It is the first cloud, or almost the first, that has arisen to dull the brightness of their friendship.

'What a lot of chin music about nothing!' breaks in



Bartle impatiently. 'The thing is done now ; it can't be undone. I agree with Croker that we had better make the best of it.'

'But not the best of Mr. Hume,' retorts Gladys angrily.

Here Mr. Murphy, opening the door, announces the arrival of Captain Ffrench.

'He's in the dhrawin'-room, miss,' says Murphy, looking at Penelope.

'Very well, Murphy, I'll be with him in a moment,' says Penelope, to the astonishment of her brother and sister.

'You will go,' says Gladys, faltering a little, and looking at Penelope with so frightened a gaze that Croker, who is ignorant of Ffrench's attachment to the now married Nan, gropes dimly for the cause of it.

'Yes ; he, at least, will sympathize with me,' says Penelope, with a little quivering glance at Croker, who feels suddenly as if the room had grown cold.

Once, twice, or so, he had allowed a suspicion of this kind to enter his mind, only to thrust it out later

on. And yet—— If it should be! If all these years she had preferred him—Ffrench—to——

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The first thought that occurs to Penelope as she enters the drawing-room is that she is in the presence of a stranger. She would hardly have known Ffrench had she met him unexpectedly, with his present aspect, in, say, the Australian Bush. Anything so altered she could hardly have imagined.

‘It isn’t true,’ says he, without preface, advancing towards her.

There is something fierce in the glance he throws at her. Penelope, utterly taken aback, forgets to reply. How has he known? Had Nan, to save them the mortification of telling it, written a full account to Julia?

‘Speak, can’t you?’ says Ffrench almost savagely.

‘There is nothing to say,’ replies Penelope in a low tone, looking away from him.

‘She is married, then?’

‘Yes, I think so. I fear so. By this time—yes.’

She had dreaded an explosion after this, but none

comes. Sitting before her with bent head and eyes fixed upon the floor, he makes no effort, as another man might, to conceal the agitation he is feeling. His brows are knitted; there is a distinct moisture upon them, that somehow, in spite of her pity for him, and without her being able to define the meaning of her own sensation, disgusts her in part. His lips are compressed, his face pale—it is evident he is really suffering. Yet, even at this moment, the conclusion is forced upon Penelope that it is anger more than grief that is consuming him.

‘I know what you are thinking,’ says Penelope hurriedly, unable to endure the silence. ‘It was a dastardly act to compel her like that! Yes, we all feel as you do. He has behaved disgracefully, unpardonably.’

‘He—he!’ exclaims Boyle, breaking into sudden vehement life. ‘Who is thinking of him? Do you think I blame him? He did quite right—only what any man would do if tempted. It is she—that devil incarnate, who almost swore to me—— She drew me on, encouraged me at every turn. Told me she would meet me next day—made an appointment so

neatly, so carefully, all the while knowing she was going to give herself to him.'

'You are mad,' said Penelope, in a tone that is almost a whisper.

She feels suffocated. She has risen to her feet, and for a moment so indignant is her gesture that it reduces him to silence. Only for a moment.

'It is you who are mad,' says he, 'if you still believe in her. Do not think to fool me with her protestations of ignorance and innocence. The whole affair was of her own contriving, and she carried it out.'

'But why, why, why?' demands Penelope. 'If, as you say, she wanted to marry him, why not do it here, and openly? We should all have liked it. Why resort to subterfuge of that kind? I tell you there is neither sense nor conscience in what you are saying.'

'She didn't dare do it!' says Ffrench, who has now lost all control over himself. 'Traitress as she has proved herself, she did not dare sell herself in my actual presence! Coquette, liar as she is, she had not courage to do that!'

'I think you had better go home,' says Penelope, in

a calm but vibrating tone. 'I will still do you the kindness to think you don't know what you are saying. By-and-by you will be the first to acknowledge how you have wronged her.'

'Wronged her!—I am sorry from my soul, Penelope, if I have offended you—but to expect me to condone that—her conduct—— I tell you——'

'But if you saw her letter, her poor, sad, despairing letter!' cries Penelope piteously.

'Pshaw!' says he. 'Credit her with all the virtues if you will; let her befool you to the top of her bent, but don't let her dream that she can hoodwink me. And yet,' with an angry frown, 'she has. Deceitful to the heart's core I always thought her; but mercenary—no—until to-day.'

'You think——'

'That she has married him for his money. What else could sane man think?'

'You believe that, not caring for him, she married him because he was rich?'

'You have put it quite correctly,' says he, with a little sneer. 'As to her ever liking him—— Well,' contemptuously, 'what do you think about that?'

‘I know she had no love for him,’ says Penelope, drawing up her slight tall figure to its fullest height. ‘I know, too, that he has behaved disgracefully towards her. But I think he loved her really, however unworthily he has behaved. And,’ with a pardonable girlish burst of rudeness, ‘I think she has married a far better man than you. How dare you talk so of our Nan!’

‘Think what you like,’ says Ffrench sullenly. ‘No one shall control my thoughts either.’ He rises and moves towards the door, as if forgetful of her and his obligation to say to her some word of farewell. At the door, however, he pauses. ‘Penelope, if I have grieved you, let me say I regret it,’ says he.

‘Oh no ; it is not that,’ says Penelope, hurrying towards him. ‘Offend me, be unkind to me, if you will ; but that you should be so unjust to my poor Nan, that is what hurts me.’

‘Well ! I would not hurt you,’ says he remorsefully.

‘Dear Boyle ! try to think more truly of her,’ says Penelope, giving him her hand, and half forgiving him his treason to Nan, because of the misery she knows he is enduring.

‘You ask what is beyond my power,’ says he, shaking his head. ‘Don’t press the point.’ Then, as if struck by the pallor of her pretty face, ‘I have added to your anxiety. I am sorry for that. You have been good to me, Penelope. You have pardoned a great deal.’

‘I have understood,’ says she simply. Her voice, however, is a little absent, because of her hearing the approach of a certain foot.

‘So have I,’ with some contrition. ‘And I thank you.’ He takes her hand and presses a grateful kiss upon it, just as Croker opens the door and enters.

## CHAPTER XV.

‘In sorrow and joy she has seen the beginning.’

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IT is a month or so later, and ‘mild October’ with its soft rich tints makes beautiful the landscape. A rather sad beauty, perhaps, tinged deep with melancholy, but very lovely withal.

‘Then came the autumn all in yellow clad,’ with its leaves of elm all golden, and the ruddy warmth of the dying beeches. The gone September had seemed more a parting touch of summer—it was hard to connect it with the fading year ; but with October there is no difficulty in believing that dissolution is indeed near.

A slow and kindly death, however ; hour by hour, day by day. No unseemly haste, only a tender sink-



ing into the chill grave that awaits us all. Low on the bosom of mother earth, the gorgeous leaves lie shivering, waiting until nature first softens them by rains and delicate passes of her all-powerful hand, and then sends them bodily into the world beneath, to give a stronger resurrection by-and-by to the young spring grasses.

‘The air is damp and hush’d and close,  
As a sick man’s room when he taketh repose  
    An hour before death.  
My very heart faints and my whole soul grieves  
At the moist rich smell of the rotting leaves  
    And the breath  
    Of the fading edges of box beneath  
And the year’s last rose.’

It is probable that the dull gray light of the morning outside may have had something to do with the depression visible on the countenances of the elder Delaneys as they sit round the breakfast table, but the letter in Penelope’s hand, written in Nan’s fine distinct handwriting, has given them cause to give voice to it.

‘What a letter!’ says Penelope, with a forlorn sigh. ‘The worst yet, it seems to me, and they have all been bad.’

‘There was that one dated from Florence. Wasn’t that a little worse?’ asks Gladys with hesitation and as if not believing in her own question.

‘Not so altogether on the murderous tack, I think,’ says Bartle critically. ‘I don’t think in that she made any allusion to “Lady Audley’s Secret,” or mentioned a bottomless well in rather uncomfortable closeness to a remark about Hume. This letter,’ pointing to the one in Penelope’s hand, ‘is suggestive. Do you think we ought to telegraph to Hume to avoid that draw-well in Florence?’

‘You and Freddy Croker seem to find a fund of amusement in poor Nan’s marriage,’ says Penelope with cold disgust.

‘What I can’t bear,’ says Gladys abruptly, taking the letter from Penelope and running her eye over it, ‘is her calling him Mr. Hume. Did you notice? That’s horrid, to my thinking. “Mr. Hume has just come into the room, and desires me to send his love to you all. Pray pardon my doing it.” Mr. Hume! So vulgar. Only dreadful people speak of their husbands in that sort of way. It isn’t nice, now is it, Pen? I do hope when she comes home she will call

him George. If she doesn't there will be rather more talk than there is already.'

'Julia says people never talk when a woman has ten thousand a year.'

'Julia is so clever!' says William the Gruff, with one of his loudest snorts.

'Anyhow, I hope Nan won't go about "Mr. Huming" him all over the place. It sets my teeth on edge.'

'Nan had always good taste. Even this hateful marriage can't have entirely demoralized her,' says Penelope.

'Then why "Mr. Hume" him to us? That's what puzzles me. Let me despise a man ever so much, I shouldn't be vulgar because of him.'

'Neither will Nan,' says Penelope decisively. 'I daresay she finds it hard to put the name on paper; that's all.'

'Poor dear heart! How he has spoiled her life for her,' says Gladys mournfully. 'I'm sure it is bad enough to be married at all, to give up one's liberty and gaiety and everything—but to find oneself tied to a wretch—— Oh, dear!'

Here she sighs off some of her indignation, and gives words to the rest :

‘Well, you wouldn’t catch me doing it ! I think, of all the big fools I’ve heard of, Nan is the biggest.’

‘Really, Gladys,’ says Bartle with all a brother’s unbearable intolerance, ‘I wish you would study your manner of speech a little. To speak of Nan as a “big fool” is to say what Nolly,’ with a glance at his youngest sister, ‘ought to be well whipped for saying.’

‘But I didn’t say it !’ protests Nolly, waking up, and shrieking this protest at him in a shrill treble alive with wrath.

‘I know that. I merely said that if you put such a sentence together you would heartily deserve a good whipping.’ The severity in his tone is meant for Gladys, but is naturally appropriated by Nolly, who waxes more and more wrathful.

‘What are you scolding me for ?’ demands she. ‘What have I done ? I didn’t call Nan a fool. I won’t be scolded for things I didn’t do. It isn’t a bit fair, is it, Penelope ?’

‘Who’s scolding you ?’ roars Bartle. ‘I’m only

saying that if you did say so and so, you would deserve a whipping.'

'Well, so would you,' retorts Nolly, vague but defiant.

'You are a very impertinent little monkey,' says Bartle angrily.

'So are you,' says Nolly in the well-known monotony of passionate childhood.

'Nolly,' says Penelope, rushing into the breach, 'go upstairs to my room and see if I left the keys on my table. And go softly so as not to disturb father.'

Nolly reluctantly, as if sorry to leave the fray, gets sideways off her chair, and does as she is bid.

'Father!' says William with a humph, 'twould take more than that to put him out. Selfish old beggar!'

'Now, William, don't,' says Penelope in a little pained voice.

'Very well, I won't then, and to make sure of keeping my promise, I'll leave the room,' says William, suiting the action to the word.

'Yes, yes, he is right; father has taken poor Nan's

unhappiness in a very cavalier fashion,' says Gladys. 'Did I tell you, Bartle, what he said to Penelope when she broke the news to him? No? Well, "Thank Heaven!" said he, "there is one of you off my shoulders!"'

Whatever Bartle's indignant answer might have been to this, is lost in another one, given *sotto voce*.

'Oh! murdher! Isn't he the divil?' says Mr. Murphy, who has come in with some hot cakes sent up by Mrs. Moloney, the cook, who has had an inkling that the young ladies are in low spirits, and thus strives to enliven them.

As nobody minds Murphy more than the tables and chairs, the conversation flows on again, unchecked by his presence.

'Poor Nan! I am afraid she will be sadly altered when we see her. I quite dread the first meeting, and so soon now—next week. She has never been really strong since that horrid fever caught her in the spring, and I suppose all the worry and misery since has upset her so much that she will be skin and bone when she arrives.'

'I can fancy her,' says Gladys sadly. 'Her

pretty colour all gone, and her face like a sheet of paper.'

'And her big eyes bigger still,' says Penelope. 'Just shining out like stars from her wan cheeks.'

'And her poor lips all pale and drawn,' says Gladys. 'And—— Oh,' tearfully, 'I hate to think of it, how full of laughter she used to be.'

'We must expect a very great change,' says Penelope. 'Never again the Nan that we knew. I can fancy her spirit quite crushed, and her smile a thing of the past.'

'I shouldn't wonder if her hair was a little gray,' says Gladys.

'Something tells me that all her front teeth will have fallen out,' says Bartle, putting in a last paralyzing touch.

It finishes Henjy at all events. That youthful person, who has been getting manfully through a handsome slice of bread-and-butter, suddenly lays it down, and gives way to a wild howl of mingled fear and grief. He gurgles and gasps, and only after a terrified examination on the part of Penelope, declares his determination to see Nan, 'now, this minnit—at

once—all at once !’—under pain of instant expiration, as it seems to Penelope.

It takes, indeed, quite a considerable time to console him, and not until he is comfortably perched on Bartle’s knee, with the sugar-bowl at a convenient distance, does he consent to mitigate the ardour of his woe.

‘ ’Twould be hard to bate him at a screech,’ says Murphy, who has been much concerned during the late encounter, ‘ Masther Henjy ’ being the apple of his eye.

‘ Fancy Nan’s being here next Monday,’ says Gladys, who seems unable to think of anything else.

‘ Not here ; up at the Castle,’ corrects Penelope.

‘ How wonderful that sounds ! Of course I always knew Mr. Hume was in love with her. I knew, too, he wanted to marry her. And yet I never thought of Nan as *grande dame*.’

‘ Now that she is one, I am afraid she is very unhappy,’ says Penelope sadly. ‘ Oh ! what good are riches ? When we were all here together poor as church mice, Nan was the gayest of the gay. Now,’



—she pauses, her emphasis sufficiently expressive to exclude the want of further explanation.

‘It is true,’ said Gladys. ‘We keep asking for money, position, rank, and all the thousand and one things that we believe go to make up the sum total of earthly prosperity, and when we have got them, lo, they melt in our mouths, as it were, and we have not even the pleasure of swallowing them.’

‘*Sic transit gloria mundi,*’ says Bartle sententially.

‘I do hope she won’t have a bad passage,’ says Penelope. ‘She is a good sailor, but those horrid boats have such a smell about them that no one can be sure of escaping the worst sickness in the world. Murphy, where is Master William? Before he goes down to the college tell him I have a letter to be posted.’

‘Yes, miss,’ says Murphy, who has been looking rather perplexed during the latter part of the conversation. He has been listening to it during a pretended arranging of the silver on the sideboard, and, not being sure of what he has heard, is now consumed

with curiosity. William! Masther William! elucidation may lie with him!

Searching high and low, he at last finds William in the schoolroom, vainly trying to grasp the Latin task that should have been conquered over-night.

‘Masther William, come here avick. Tell me this. What’s the manin’ o’ the word thransit, at all, at all?’

‘Eh?’ says William, rather lost in his Latin.

‘Thransit, me dear. Thransit was the word. I put me whole ear to it.’

‘Oh, transit. Er—well—a passing,’ says William, after a severe struggle with his small store of knowledge.

‘Faix ye have it,’ says Mr. Murphy admiringly. ‘Fegs it isn’t for nothing that they’re always whackin’ ye in the school below. Ye’ll be a smart boy yet, with the blessing. Oh, wisha! An’ isn’t it the terrible bad thing entirely for her the crathure? An’ she wid a stomach not worth a farthin’! Oh dear, oh dear! An’ comin’ back for the first time an’ all! ’Tis raal cruel on her; ’tis thruly. I’m thinkin’ ’tis prayin’ we ought to be for her from this till Monday.’

‘Praying? For whom?’ asks William, growing interested. ‘Who on earth are you talking about?’

‘Arrah, who would it be but yer own sisther o’ course. Poor child! Poor Miss Nan! Poor Mrs. Hume, I mane. May the saints give me sinse.’

‘You want it,’ says William grimly. ‘And I hope they’ll hurry up about it, as I’m anxious to hear you explain yourself. What’s the matter with Nan?’

‘Say-sickness, me dear. No less. An’ terrible bad it is, I’m tould. What worse would ye be wishin’ her? I heard ’em talkin’ jist now in the dinin’-room, an’ Masther Bartle, says he, “She’ll have a sick thransit of a glorious Monday,” says he. An’ now, Masther William, tell me this—why would the say be rough on the crathure if he’s so cock sure the Monday will be glorious?’

‘Ha—ha—ha,’ roars William most unkindly.

‘Wisha, what ails ye now?’ asks Murphy indignantly. ‘Ye’re for all the world like an ould hen cackling.’

‘Ho—ho—ho,’ improves William, holding on to his sides.

‘Arrah, go to the divil out of this!’ says Mr.

Murphy, growing exceedingly wroth. 'Y' ought to be ashamed of yerself, an' yer eldest sisther on the fair road to be killed be the raging say. Oh, law! but isn't boys miserable crathures! There's no houldin' them when the spirit moves 'em—an' it's always a bad one. Here, get along wid ye down to yer school, an' that ye may get a good hidin' is the biggest wish o' me heart. Ye must be bad entirely to get a laugh out of the ruin o' yer sisther's inside.'

## CHAPTER XVI.

‘Oh Nature, Nature, you’re enough  
To put a quaker in a huff  
Or make a martyr grumble.’

MR. MURPHY’S ‘Glorious Monday’ has dawned at last, and everybody in Rathmore is on the tiptoe of expectation. In a last hasty scrawl, Nan had given them to understand that she would be with them about three o’clock, and now, already, that hour is striking. There had been no suggestion in her letter of their meeting her at the Castle, a relief to the girls, as next to Nan herself they dread meeting Hume. The latter indeed has bit by bit grown to be a modern ogre in their estimation, with that old worthy’s insatiable malice, unlimited power, unutterable cruelty, nails, teeth, hair and beard, and everything complete. Unique, in fact, though at any price a bad bargain.

‘She may be here at any moment!’ says Penelope, turning from the window to speak to Gladys. The others have all dispersed; the children, sorely against their will, having been consigned to the care of Mrs. Moloney, with a request that she will see that they do not soil the new pinafores specially made by Penelope in honour of Nan’s return.

‘I quite dread it,’ says Gladys. ‘Don’t you? The meeting her, I mean. I can just fancy how she will look.’

‘A word expresses it,’ says Penelope, with sorrowful conviction. ‘Crushed! that is how she will look.’

‘Yes, inwardly and outwardly; I cannot bear to think of her as—dowdy!’

‘That will be hard on her. Because I feel sure from the way she writes that she won’t touch a penny of his money. And I don’t blame her either. Well, we must only try to help her there; she can have as much as she used to have when at home.’

‘And serve him right, too, if he sees his wife going about shabby.’

‘It will break down her spirit, however. We can’t

prevent that. She will never be our dear old lively Nan again.'

'Do you remember how she used to keep us all alive? She was the best of us. Always ready for a laugh or jest. And hardly ever a cross word for the children, no matter how troublesome they might be. And how fond she was of dancing. Well, well, that's all over.'

'Don't speak of her as if she were dead,' says Penelope, with a little shiver. 'Oh, poor, pretty, merry Nan!'

Something—a slight noise behind them—an indistinct little *frou-frou* as of silken petticoats makes them turn, and——

Is this Hume's victim? Is this radiant creature, clad in the latest Parisian frock, the pale 'dowdy,' crushed Nan? Good heavens, what is the meaning of it all!

'Here I am!' cries Mrs. Hume in a fresh and thrilling tone, rich in youth and spirits. She is plainly delighted at the sensation she has caused. 'Oh!' with a long-drawn sigh of deepest joy, and a little glad swaying of the body towards them—'Oh, girls!'

‘It’s you. It is really you!’ cry they; and they fly to her, and fling themselves bodily upon her. There is no doubt about their ecstasy. ‘So you have come! But how? We have been staring out of the window at the avenue for the last hour.’

‘Whilst I came in by the back way!’ laughing happily. ‘Through the yard I came. I was determined to steal a march upon you. I know you are all well, because I cross-examined one of the women up there,’ pointing airily in a direction that might lead you to Nova Zembla, but is meant to lead you to the Castle, ‘and she said there wasn’t so much as a cut finger amongst you.’

‘And—and you?’ asks Penelope, hesitatingly, who is lost in a sea of amazement.

Can this merry, lovely girl be the doleful writer of those depressing letters that have dropped down upon them like so many damp clouds during the past month?

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ says Mrs. Hume brightly. ‘Now that I’m back with you all, I mean. Oh! Penny!’ with another hug, ‘it’s grand to be home again.’



‘It will be only half home now, though,’ says Gladys, who is evidently making a careful study of her.

‘Yes, that’s the worst of it. But I can get here every day, and have you up with me besides. He can’t spoil all that, anyway.’

The girls change colour. After a desperate encounter with her wits, Penelope manages to get out the following brilliant piece of courtesy :

‘And—and—how’s he?’ in a faltering tone, the usually lowered tone that one adopts when speaking of the hopelessly disgraced.

‘Beast!’ says Mrs. Hume promptly.

At this the younger girls once again interchange looks, and finally give it up.

‘Oh,’ says Gladys, ‘seeing you—hearing you—we thought—— Of course, until this moment, we knew you could not possibly—— But you look so well, so happy, that now we hoped that——’

‘You can hope as much as you like,’ says Mrs. Hume sturdily. ‘But you’ll never see what you hope for. How could you, when you remember everything?’

There is an awkward pause after this, that threatens to be lengthened, but for Gladys—who, having been born with a full sense of the ludicrous, suddenly gives way to a stifled laugh.

‘Anyway,’ says she irrepressibly, ‘he doesn’t check either your spirit or your dressmaker’s bills.’

Indeed, Nan is in such full feather, and so well gowned, that it is quite a treat to look at her.

‘No,’ says she. ‘Why? What did you think?’

‘Nothing. Nothing at all,’ interrupts Penelope. ‘Come over here, and sit by the fire, and tell us everything. You can’t think how we have missed you.’

‘And as for me, well I just lived on the thought of getting back,’ says Nan; and indeed one might well believe her. Her very eyes seem to laugh, and her whole air is full of a sweet exhilaration.

‘Where are the boys?’ asks she. ‘I’ve got so many things for them. But they were too big to bring in the carriage, and I had to leave them behind me. They must come up to the Castle to get them. And as for you—— Gladys, do you remember a colour you used to fancy, a sort of electric blue—well, I’ve got you such a pretty velvet frock just that

shade ; and another for you, Penny, only yours is paler, to suit your hair. And where are my Nolly and Henjy ?’

‘ They are with Moloney. Let them stay with her a moment, Nan,’ says Penelope desperately ; ‘ I—we must speak to you.’

‘ What’s the good of it ?’ says Nan dejectedly. ‘ All the talking in the world won’t alter the fact that he made me marry him against my will. But I suppose it must be gone over. Wasn’t it a shameful trick he played me ? Who would forgive it ? Not I for one.’

‘ Nor I, for another,’ says Gladys.

‘ You don’t speak, Pen,’ says Nan reproachfully. Penelope reddens.

‘ It is only—that as he isn’t unkind to you—as he is actually kind,’ says she, glancing at Nan’s beautiful costume—‘ it has occurred to me that love should be blamed, not he. However,’ hastily, ‘ that does not blind me to the fact that you are unhappy. We all feel for, and with you. Oh, Nancy, darling ! it must be dreadful to have to live one’s whole life with a man one hates. We must all try and love you twice

as much as ever, to make up to you for it in a small way.'

'What seemed to me so bad,' says Gladys, 'was your having to go on a tour with him. To be alone with him must have been worse than anything. And for a month or more; and all through Switzerland. How detestable it must have been.'

'Yes, yes,' says Penelope with deepest sympathy. 'To spend day after day with a man who had proved himself so base. I should think you often wished yourself dead.'

'I didn't,' says Mrs. Hume slowly, who is looking at them with a growing surprise in her large eyes.

'No; then that was very good of you,' says Penelope. 'Never mind, darling'—caressingly—'you'll be better now you have us again. We'll back you up on every occasion. He shan't feel that you are friendless ever again. And by degrees, no doubt, you will try and forget that shocking journey.'

'But what a pity that it should be so remembered,' says Gladys regretfully. 'To see all those delicious

places that we would give our eyes to see, and can't, and then to hate them! to feel every hour a burden; not to enjoy one's self at all. Oh, it is cruel!

Mrs. Hume, who has been staring at them blankly, now breaks in.

'Is that how you took it?' says she in a little dismay, tempered with kindly contempt. 'You were wrong then. Do you imagine that I was so highly strung, such an orthodox heroine of romance that I was bound to reject the good that lay ready to my hand, all because of the unkind fate that had seized me? No, indeed. I was and am'—with a little angry frown—'determined to get all the good I can out of the life that has been forced upon me. I went with—with him to Switzerland, and I tell you now'—rather defiantly—'that I never enjoyed myself so much in my life as when I was there. It'—enthusiastically, and as if for the moment forgetful of her grievances, and thinking only of her past delight—'it was all heavenly. My only regret was, that you could not share my happiness. Who is he'—haughtily—'that you should imagine he had power to

check my pleasure in the beauties that nature spread before me ?’

This is taking such an extremely high tone—is such a remarkable reading of the difficulty, that Penelope and Gladys feel themselves left without a word to say. An awkward pause ensues with which they hardly know what to do, but which is mercifully terminated by the entrance of the two youngest children, who instantly precipitate themselves upon Nan.

‘Oh, Nanny. And you’re not changed a bit,’ cries Henjy, standing on tiptoe and staring eagerly into her face. ‘Penny said you’d be like a ghost, and that your eyes would be starting out of your head, and your hair would be white; and Bartle said your teeth would be ‘all pulled out. Open your mouth a minute, will you ?’

‘And Gladys said you wouldn’t have a rag to your back,’ says Nolly, glaring defiantly at the crushed Gladys over Nan’s shoulder. ‘They said they knew you wouldn’t touch a penny of Mr.——’

‘Nolly hold your tongue,’ exclaims Penelope in a tone of such sharp anger, that coming from her—the

usually meek and mild—it drives even the irrepressible Norah to silence.

‘Nonsense! Don’t scold her,’ says Nan. ‘Of course, I can see now how you would all look at it, but you’ll understand in time. I’m not the sort of person to go in rags,’ with a little laugh, ‘if it is possibly to be avoided. And because he has made me unhappy, am I still further to martyrize myself? Come let us talk sense whatever we do. Children, to begin with you’—laughing more naturally this time—‘what does sense mean? Sweeties, toys, cakes, eh? Well, they are all in the carriage that brought me here. I wonder where it is?’

‘Here it is. I hear the wheels scrunching in the gravel,’ cries Henjy hysterically. ‘Hurry out and bring them in.’

And, indeed, the brougham that she had left in the yard the better to steal a march on her sisters, now drives slowly up to the hall door, whereupon there is a regular stampede on the part of all, and a return in a few minutes with all their arms heavily laden. Never were children made happier by more beautiful gifts. As for the girls; what

a terrible girl she will be who knows herself indifferent to a new frock! At present she does not exist.

Through Penelope's mind, however, one thought runs. It is a sort of conundrum, and presents itself in many different forms, the chief one being, 'When a man is a monster, what makes him shower money upon his wife that she may render herself and her people happy?' The answer seems far to seek.

The children are still in ecstasies, when a shadow falling through one of the windows causes Gladys to look up from her delighted contemplation of her new gown.

'Oh, here is Mr. Hume!' cries she in a little nervous whisper.



## CHAPTER XVII.

‘Well, yes, of course it must be so,  
No argument can shake it :  
If one will offer up a heart,  
The other need but take it.’

‘GOOD gracious ! Can I not even have one hour here to myself !’ says Nan petulantly, hardly beneath her breath as her husband enters the room. There is something of nervousness in his manner as he advances towards Penelope, but no hesitation.

‘Well, Penelope,’ says he, smiling and taking the hand she has extended to him. He holds it for a moment, and then stooping kisses her. Somehow at this, and at an expression in his face that puzzles but grieves her, the tears rise to Penelope’s eyes. Instinctively and almost without her knowledge her fingers tighten upon his. A monster, with that gentle smile ! Oh, no !

‘I am glad to see you,’ says she shyly, awkwardly, confusedly ; yet his look of gratitude is unmistakable. He turns to Gladys after this, and kisses her too, to that damsel’s considerable astonishment. She had been prepared to meet him with scorn, and lo, and behold, the scorn has ended in an embrace. ‘What a complication,’ said she later on to Penelope. ‘To hate a man properly one can’t possibly let one’s self kiss him. And, now——’

She was born with a knowledge of human nature.

‘Nan’s looking well, isn’t she?’ says Hume with a half glance at his wife, who refuses to meet it.

‘Oh, so well,’ says Gladys cordially, who is not so unnerved as Penelope.

‘They have given me a slight outline of what they expected,’ says Nan, with a chill smile, sent in her husband’s direction, though hardly at him. ‘A ghost the children told me they were prepared to see. Hardly complimentary to you, was it?’

‘Oh, Nan,’ says Penelope, in a reproachful undertone.

‘Well, you know, we thought she would probably have grown thinner ; travelling about is always so wearing, especially to a person unaccustomed to it,’

says Gladys, with an aplomb that positively startles Penelope. 'Anyhow, we were wrong. It is you who have grown thin, not Nan.'

'A compliment,' says he, smiling; 'I shall go travelling every year, if that is to be the result. I was becoming too stout.'

'A pity you can't marry afresh every year,' says Nan, with a cruel little laugh. 'If by so doing you could let the brides go free, what a chance it would be for them. Penny, where is Murphy? I want to see him too. Oh! how I wish the boys had not been sent up for their exams, this one special day.'

'It couldn't be helped,' says Penelope. 'William has only gone to Skibbereen, and will be back to-morrow, but Bartle is in Dublin.'

'So is Boyle. He is stationed there,' says Gladys thoughtlessly.

A vivid crimson rushes to Nan's cheek. Hume, after a second's knowledge of it, turns his attention once more to Penelope.

'How is your father?' asks he politely.

'Quite well, thank you. By-and-by, Nan, you will come up to see him?'

‘Is—is he in a good temper with me?’ asks Nan, blanching a little. Her marriage, her freedom through it, all is forgotten; once again the old terror of the unfriendly father reigns supreme.

‘The best,’ says Gladys laughing. ‘He has got rid of you; could he desire more?’ After a decent hesitation, they all laugh with her.

‘I thought, perhaps, you would come home now,’ says Hume, looking at his wife; ‘you say you dislike going about alone, so——’

‘Oh, no. I’m not going back to the Castle in such a hurry,’ says Nan, openly refusing to acknowledge the word ‘Home.’ ‘I shall stay here for ever so long. Why, I have only just recovered them, as it were. I shan’t go back to Hume until I must.’

There is nothing actually rude either in her words or tone, but there is decidedly something unpleasant about them.

‘One can understand that,’ says Hume with perfect breeding. ‘Why sever yourself from your sisters at all? I daresay you might induce them to come back to dinne with you.’

‘Oh, thanks—not to-night, I think,’ says Penelope nervously.

‘But indeed you must. It is the very thing,’ cries Nan eagerly. ‘Not a word against it. You shall both come and help me to get through this terribly long evening.’

This delightful speech so shocks Penelope that she thinks a little, and glances involuntarily at Hume. If she had expected to see him either chagrined or angered she finds herself mistaken. His face is absolutely impassive.

‘You see, you must come,’ says he calmly. ‘We have your promise? Thanks. It will be such a pleasure to us both. Until then—good-bye.’

As he shakes hands with the children—who have been gazing at him furtively—he stoops suddenly, as if some thought strikes him, and taking up Henjy in his arms, kisses him. The boy’s bonny handsome face may have compelled him to this caress, or some other hidden longing. However it is, he carries the child with him, and only lets him go as he reaches the hall door.

‘Now we can talk comfortably,’ says Mrs. Hume,

sitting down by the fireside and pulling Nolly on to her lap.

It is horrible, it is treacherous, but both Gladys and Penelope feel that they cannot respond to her remark with a warmth that has any honesty in it. Are they already going over to the enemy? Has a plausible word or two, a somewhat worn face, a brotherly kiss, sufficed to turn them from their allegiance? And yet, is it possible to regard the man who has just gone out as an enemy? Surely, surely there must be a mistake somewhere.

‘Now for a good gossip,’ says Nan gaily. ‘Where’s Freddy? Here, or persecuting the innocent at the Irish bar?’

‘He’s in Dublin,’ says Gladys, after a perceptible pause. Penelope, who has been trifling with one of the children’s new toys, drops it rather awkwardly.

‘Anything wrong about him?’ asks Nan after a glance at Penelope’s face.

‘N—o. But he hasn’t been quite friendly here lately,’ says Gladys abruptly, and as if saying something that has to be got over. ‘Pen—we—thought his manner rather strange just before he left; and

just fancy—he actually went away without coming to say good-bye to us.’

‘But why? What happened? Penelope, you know,’ says Nan.

‘I don’t indeed. Why on earth should I know more than Gladys?’ says Penelope with a little laugh. She has quite recovered any self-possession she may have lost. ‘People are always fancying things; or he may have been told some absurd lie about us—and chose to believe it.’

‘Not in the least like him,’ says Nan. ‘No, there must be something else.’

‘Well, if there is, time I daresay will reveal it; meanwhile, let us discuss a gayer subject.’

‘He used to be such a chum of yours,’ says Nan reflectively, regarding her with searching eyes. ‘Dear me, what an old friend he seems. Why, we have known him for more years than I can count.’

‘So many that he has had time to weigh us and find us wanting,’ says Penelope carelessly. ‘Plenty of time to get tired of us. I hear he is doing very well at the Bar. Julia was in town last week, and says he is being very highly spoken of. She says

he is considered one of the most eloquent men in the profession. Just think of Freddy as an orator. He never struck me as being silver-tongued.'

'He never struck me as being thoroughly worthless,' says Nan coldly. 'To give you all up like that. Oh, I don't believe it. There must be something; Freddy was as good as a brother in this house.'

'He's been very kind to Bartle in many ways since he went up to Dublin,' says Penelope in a low tone.

'Well, if Pen has lost one friend she has gained another,' says Gladys, breaking into an irrepressible laugh. 'When Boyle heard of your marriage he went out of his mind first, and then determined to try conclusions with Pen. He has haunted her ever since, and would be even now sitting in her pocket, but that a kindly interposition of Providence sent him back to his regiment. He's in Dublin, too.'

'Yes, you told me. It seems to me that everybody is there,' says Nan laughing. 'Well, Pen, I always thought it would be suicide, it is a relief to find it is only you.'



‘He’s not her only suitor, however,’ goes on Gladys, cackling gaily. ‘She’s got another. A regular sweet-heart this time.’

‘No? Another! Really, you know, Penny, this is more than one has bargained for. Well?’

‘Guess.’

‘Jack Leslie. As she has already impounded one of my “followers,” why not two?’

‘Pouf! Jack Leslie indeed! A real live lord, rather. Cashelmore, if you please! Nothing less than an Earl would content her. Here he comes, day after day, to——’

‘Don’t mind her, Nan! if he comes to see anyone it is herself. It would make you cry to see him watching the door until she enters. Anything more scandalously rude than his treatment of me could hardly be imagined. “Yes, Miss Delaney? Ah—er—No! I mean; I beg pardon; what were you saying?” Then in comes Gladys, and my pale student brightens into life.’

‘Brightens! Brightens! What a word to use,’ cries Gladys. ‘Ridiculous fellow! It would take a ton of Aspinall’s best varnish to make him shine in

society. You should see him. Look, here he comes in, and there he seats himself, just like this,' suiting the action to the word, 'staring into his hat as if he wanted to fix on his mind the name of the maker. And not a word out of him all the time. I believe he is compiling notes for some stupendous work on St. Patrick's grand-aunt all the time he is here.'

'He'd hardly choose the nest of a magpie in which to sit and think,' says Nan, laughing.

'Well, here he comes, nevertheless,' says Penelope. 'Motive, or motives, unknown. We have tried saying "not at home" to him, but it is of no use. He tells Murphy he will sit in the garden until we return, and it doesn't make one feel well to have to descend from one's bedroom in half-an-hour trying to look as if one had just returned from Paris. I believe Murphy favours him and gives him a hint to remain. He's a terrible young man certainly, and of no value at all. There he sits in that particular chair,' pointing to it, 'and beyond wearing it out I don't see what else he does.'

'He will never wear out his tongue, at all events,' says Gladys flippantly.

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‘He needn’t, if you are to be his wife,’ says Nan. Then, as if struck by the absurdity of her words, she bursts out laughing. ‘Fancy Gladys a wife!’ says she.

‘Well, why not?’ demands that lovely damsel saucily; ‘I’d make as good a one as you, any day.’

Scarcely has she said it than consternation seizes her. Nan reddens, colouring slowly, painfully, and Penelope looks unutterable reproach at the culprit.

‘It is different,’ says Nan at last, rubbing her forehead softly against Nolly’s fluffy locks. ‘I didn’t want to be a wife.’

‘Neither do I,’ cries Gladys. ‘There! we are in the same box.’

‘And yet Cashelmore would be a good match,’ says Nan.

‘What! for a baby like that?’ says Penelope, pointing the finger of scorn at Gladys.

‘There is no such thing as a baby of sixteen, now-a-days,’ says Nan.

‘Well, I like to hear you,’ cries Gladys indignantly. ‘All at once then, I am to be suddenly grown up. Yesterday I was a child, to-day—because a lord (as you

vainly imagine) comes a-courting—I am to be a woman grown, full one-and-twenty. It won't do, however. Rather than marry him,' with a little grimace, 'I'll stay a child for ever. Oh, Penny, think of it! That great, tall, solemn creature, whose sole thought is of "roots," and "origins," and "first causes." Oh no, I thank you.'

'It is too soon to say "No, thank you,"' says Nan teasingly. 'Wait till he asks you.'

'It's all nonsense,' says Penelope. 'I don't believe he has a thought of her. He only comes here because he is so bored at home. In the spring he is going abroad, and then we shall be happily delivered from him. I often wonder why he doesn't try some other house as a place of escape from the old Dowager, because here he gets only monosyllables out of me, and from Gladys the sauciest flouts. She makes game of him to his face, and he positively seems to like it.'

'He doesn't see it, perhaps,' says Nan.

'Yes, he does. The more solemn he looks, the wilder grow her sallies. He seems quite content to sit and listen and stare at her.'

‘Those roots will do him no permanent injury, I expect,’ says Nan. Then, with a touch of pride in her tone, and a lengthened gaze at Gladys: ‘After all, she is well worth a stare.’

And in truth she is, with her laughing eyes, and red, red lips, and brown hair warm with gold.

‘So you see I have turned the tables on you,’ says Penelope to Gladys. ‘I have proved him your sweetheart, not mine.’

‘You are a mendacious person,’ returns Gladys, making her a little *moue*.

‘Sweetheart! what a lovely old name that is,’ says Nan; and then, as if overwhelmed by some sudden dismal thought, ‘Oh, and I’m out of it all!’ cries she. ‘I can never have a sweetheart again. Just think of all the harm that man has done me.’

‘Never mind, darling, there are other things,’ says Gladys consolingly.

‘And—perhaps—in time, you may grow to like him,’ suggests Penelope timidly.

‘Him? Never! I shall take very good care I don’t,’ declares Mrs. Hume indignantly. ‘There, go

away and put on your things, and don't talk nonsense. The idea of my ever liking him !

Feeling rather snubbed, the girls go upstairs to dress themselves to go with her to the Castle, whilst Nan pays a duty visit to her father.

'Penelope!' says Gladys solemnly, as she closes the door behind her, 'she—it is not at all what I expected.'

'No! Is it?' in a still more tragic whisper. 'I don't know whether it is worse or better! Gladys, do you think he is quite all—that—eh? Can she have made a mistake! He looks like a person misunderstood.'

'Storms are dreadful things. He may have been obliged to elope with her against his will.'

'Yes. That is what I have been thinking. I thought,' slowly, 'it was so nice the way he kissed us!'

'I felt inclined to cry. I never saw anyone so changed—so sad.'

'I don't care whether it is unkind towards Nan or not,' says Penelope desperately, 'I'm sorry for him. I am indeed.'

‘And she looks so well, so—so happy. In quite good spirits. And he evidently lavishes pretty things on her.’

‘Yet how she speaks of him, and looks at him!’

‘There is one thing, however,’ says Gladys thankfully. ‘She doesn’t call him “Mr. Hume.” That would have been so unpleasant. She doesn’t call him anything.’

‘Yes, she does!’ corrects Penelope mournfully. ‘She calls him, “Beast!”’

‘Oh yes. Did you remark that?’ says Gladys. ‘Well, come on; we must only hope matters will clear up.’

Down in the hall they find Nan awaiting them.

‘He had a toothache; he could not talk much. It was a great chance for me,’ says she, alluding to her father. ‘He got out the usual “Tcha—Tcha,” and a few words that sounded like women, idiots, husbands, after which I said I’d send him a cure for his old tooth and fell precipitately—right into the hands of Murphy. Isn’t he looking well, dear old heart?’

‘Who? Father?’

‘Oh, get out!’ says Mrs. Hume, who has fallen

back into the homely colloquial style: 'Murphy, of course. I declare I was so glad to see him that I threw my arms round his neck and fairly hugged him, much to his consternation. He was painfully embarrassed.'

Gladys gives way to a little shriek of laughter.

'Consider Murphy as he found himself enfolded in the embrace of Mrs. Hume of Hume. We are quite worn out from Murphy's pride in your marriage.'

'That was the one sting in my joy at seeing him,' says Nan, with a shrug. 'It was "ma'am"—"Mrs. Hume," at every other word. Detestable name! Come on, come on, we shall be late.' She moves briskly to the door, the girls following.

'Bless me, what a smart brougham!' says Gladys, when they are trotting gaily up the avenue. 'After all,' examining with appreciation the cushions and lining, etc., 'there's nothing like comfort. Do you know,' with a perfectly shameless materialism, considering the seraphic qualities of her delicate face, 'the being in love with a person isn't much when you come to think of it. The thing is, to be in the swim with the best of them. To have nice things



round one—to be able to wear velvet instead of velveteen!’

‘She’ll marry Cashelmore yet,’ says Nan, with a glance of intense amusement.

‘Indeed I shall not,’ says Gladys vivaciously. ‘Not for all the velvet in the world!’ at which her sisters laugh.

‘You have a thousand minds,’ says Penelope; ‘you can change them at any moment. Happy you.’ Does a faint, faint sigh escape her? ‘Nan, I don’t think Mr. Hume had this small brougham when—before—when last he was here.’

‘No,’ carelessly. ‘I hate being entombed, and that laudau is a sort of moving vault. I told him so, and he got me this in London.’

‘He is very good-natured,’ says Gladys, rather forcibly.

‘Yes; I dare say,’ indifferently. ‘That reminds me he has bought you both the very sweetest necklets. We saw them at Florence; and he at once said they looked like you, Penny. Do you know, the moment he said it I thought so too? You are so fair, and that light, thin gold, with its innumerable

chains, is so becoming to a really white neck ; though I hardly think they are so pretty as the pearls he got you in Paris. He got me some too ; I like them better than anything I have, they go so well with the white Indian silk he made me buy in London.'

'It seems to me he has given you everything. Can't you give him something ?' says Gladys impulsively.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

‘ Who knows what word were best to say ?  
For last year’s leaves lie dead and red  
On this sweet day, in this green May,  
And barren corn makes bitter bread :  
What shall be said ?’

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WHITE trees, white lawns, white gardens, and a soft snow always falling. Hume, with its turrets, and buttresses and battlements, lies hidden in a glistening shroud. Christmas is close at hand.

Two months have gone by to-day since Nan’s wedding took place—two full months that have considerably exercised the minds of her sisters. What can Nan mean ? Is the woman born—to say nothing of the man—who could understand her ? Is she dead to all generous feeling ? Has that fateful marriage waked within her heart hitherto slumbering forces

of frivolity—captiousness, tempers innumerable and unnameable ?

Her manner to her husband, or rather her manners—for they are legion—are each in themselves a study. To-day treacherously civil, to-morrow an icicle. Fitful, capricious, merry. Now cold, now absolutely repellant, now gay to the very verge of friendliness. It is impossible, indeed, to know where to have her ; so strong is her personality that she sways those in contact with her according to her moods—all save Hume. His behaviour to her seldom varies from the calm, courteous lines he has laid down for himself. Her rapid changes of manner he has taught himself to respect and withstand, and if his heart beats high with hope when, as sometimes happens, she treats him with an almost boyish *camaraderie*, he betrays that as little as the disappointment that follows it, when within the hour he is cruelly wounded by a contempt that speaks of a wrong perversely believed in—false though it be. This cherished and absorbing sense of wrong, clung to so obstinately, creates within her at times a dislike that often borders upon hatred.

The first meeting between her and Boyle Ffrench had occurred about a week after her return to the castle. Hume, coming into the library where she was sitting writing letters, had said to her somewhat abruptly :

‘I met Ffrench down in the village this morning, and asked him to dinner.’

‘Boyle!’ springing impulsively to her feet. ‘Oh, why did you do that?’

‘Why should I not?’ coldly—greatly angered by the crimson flush that has risen to her brow. ‘Come,’ laying a hand upon her shoulder and deliberately turning her to where the dull autumn light can fall more clearly on her face, ‘let me understand about this, at least. Before our marriage you told me your heart was free—that all men were indifferent to you—excepting myself, whom you hated. This man Ffrench was specially mentioned at another interview, and you then assured me he was less than nothing to you . . . You meant what you said?’

‘Take your hand away,’ said Nan, in a soft dangerous little voice, hardly above a whisper; and then—  
‘We are not both liars,’ said she bitterly.

Hume had turned rather white, but he kept his composure.

‘I can let that go by,’ said he, ‘the more easily, in that I know the words to be of no moment with you. You do not really think me a liar. I defy you to do so. In your soul you know me honest towards you both in word and deed. The question between us now, is only why you object to receive Captain Ffrench in your own house?’

‘Does that mean, amongst other delicate insinuations, that I should not object to receive him in any other house?’

‘Don’t go in for that sort of thing, Nan,’ said he; ‘it doesn’t suit you. Leave the hackneyed style of retort to women of the world, and answer me—you—plainly. Think it out. Why refuse to accept your cousin as a guest?’

‘I don’t refuse. That would be out of my power, now you have asked him. But——’ She hesitated there, and finally flashed round at him with a sudden passion of reproach. ‘Don’t you know,’ she cried, ‘can’t you see how awkward it is for me? You have made everything awkward for me. I never meet any-

one now without wondering what they are thinking of me, in what mood they are speculating on my strange—my hateful marriage.'

'All that can be lived down,' said Hume calmly. 'There are, however, other things that might not be so easy to cast behind one. This awkwardness, then, is the sole cause of your objection to Ffrench? There is no reason why he should not come?'

'None,' haughtily. 'Your cross-examination is absurd, and has no *raison d'être*. If he had accepted your invitation it would be a different thing.'

'He has accepted it,' said Hume quietly.

'What?'

'After all, you hardly know him so well as you imagine,' with a slow smile. 'He will dine here to-night. He did not hesitate about it.'

'He accepted?'

'Yes; I assure you of it. And most willingly, too. Why not? It surprises you; but perhaps he is not so altogether heartbroken as you fancied him. Come, think of him as on the road to recovery,' said Hume, with a short but not unkindly laugh. He would, indeed, have fain made a jest of the whole matter.

‘Well!’ said Nan, briefly but eloquently.

She had felt a certain degree of nervousness when dressing for dinner, but it was nervousness thrown away. Anything more unconcerned than French’s manner when they met could hardly be imagined. Indifference could no further go. The whole affair was as conventional as it should not have been, and he pressed her hand (that trembled slightly through sheer uncertainty) as vaguely as though no love, no anger towards her had ever reigned within his breast. She might, indeed, have been the most indifferent of his acquaintances. After that first ‘How d’ye do?’ he had drawn back from her, and devoted all his time and conversation to Penelope, who was dining there that night.

He was by no means, either, a dull cavalier. He talked incessantly; he had many a tale to tell. His laugh rang as gaily as it ever did, which perhaps, after all, was not saying much for it.

He seemed, indeed, for that one night at least, gay beyond his wont. Only Hume was not deceived in him. The gleam in the dark, restless eyes as they subtly, secretly sought Nan’s face, told its own tale



of a passion still alive, still ardent, revengeful, hopeful!

Nan, who was gowned with very special care that evening, had evidently agreed within herself to be charming to him, to obliterate, by showering on him little delicacies of the present season, all unpleasant memories of the last. She, in fact, decided to 'make it up with him,' in youthful parlance. And all to no avail. Her pretty advances were met with studied indifference. Her most charming speeches were received without the faintest enthusiasm. Altogether, towards the close of the evening one could see that she was not only damped, but thoroughly piqued.

Hume at all events saw it, and with a rather angry sort of amusement; why should she care whether Ffrench was in good or bad temper with her? His own relations with her compelled him, against himself, to distrust her.

It was astonishing, after this, the amount of leave that Ffrench managed to get. Either his Colonel was a very good-natured man, or else he was heartily glad to get rid of him. Gone to-day and here to-morrow—the old phrase read backwards for him; and,

of course, it is but a little journey from Dublin to Cork and back again. The county was rather gay at that time ; everybody making a point of giving either a dance or a dinner for Mrs. Hume, who was voted charming by all. Her marriage had been romantic, and—which told more for her—a good one in every sense of the word ; Hume, with his ten thousand a year, was a millionaire in Ireland, where rents are a rather mythical matter at present. And wherever the Humes appeared, French was almost sure to appear also. He must, indeed, at this period have made it the business of his life to secure invitations for such entertainments as were given for Nan and her husband.

Not that he gave much of his time to Nan. He might, indeed, be honestly considered to avoid her. It was noticeable, however, that though always a little cold to her, he was never out of sight of her charming face ; always reluctant to speak to her, he yet kept himself ever within easy distance of her voice.

Nan, whose natural vivacity had returned to her fourfold, as it were, and who was going through a course of spoiling and petting from the bigwigs in the

county, felt a natural, if rather coquettish, desire to break down this obstinate coldness ; she seemed, indeed, to feel it incumbent on her to compel this old love to re-enter her service—this time under the title of friend. A dangerous experiment in most cases, and specially so in hers.

Her marriage with Hume had heightened her charms in many ways. Those born of rich ancestors have a pretty talent for spending money, unknown to the class who have been friends with poverty for generations ; and the laces and silks and velvets that now decked Nan's lovely person suited her, and threw out the traces of aristocratic blood that ran generously through her veins. Her beautiful face, with its thorough breeding shown in every feature, borrowed fresh lustre from the Hume diamonds and the dainty gowns that filled her wardrobe ; and though her marriage had been a positive terror to her, once accomplished, she seemed to have made up her mind to it, and to suffer from it very little. It raised anger, contempt, indignation within her, but never grief or melancholy. She would inveigh against Hume by the hour to Penelope or Gladys (who had grown

rather cold with their sympathy), but a tear on the 'ruin of her life'—as she was pleased to call it—she never shed.

She moved like a young queen in her new surroundings, holding a court wherever she went. It must be conceded that she was a sad coquette, but a harmless one, as she went deeply into nothing, and kept her heart always young. In fact, she cared for no one; and, as her careless flirtations stopped short at married men, she incurred small censure at the hands of the married women—an important class. She was so merry too, so genial, so unmistakably kind-hearted, that it was difficult to be angry with her, or jealous, or accusative beyond the point that she was frivolous to a light-hearted degree that, after all, did no harm to anyone.

But that Boyle, her old friend, should be unfriendly to her was a bitter drop in her cup. If he had anything to forgive, why couldn't he do it? Where, said her philosophy, was the good of worrying about things that couldn't be helped? The kindness of her nature betrayed itself in a dislike to be in anyone's black books, and she made up her mind to seek

an opportunity in which she might show Boyle the error of his ways, and bring him back to his allegiance. This same kindliness might have served her with Hume, but that unfortunately she was thoroughly convinced of his unlimited affection for her. That she despised, taking it as her due.

One night they were dining with the Whites of Carrigmore, and Ffrench, of course, was present ; she made up her mind suddenly to take a step that should kill any animosity towards her that might still exist in his mind. Finding him standing near her, talking as usual to Penelope, she leaned towards him, and called him by his name. He flushed slightly as she spoke—and came to her.

‘The chrysanthemums,’ said she, with the charming smile he knew so well, and a little glance from under her lashes. ‘They tell me Mrs. White’s are not to be beaten ; yet they are good, too, at Hume. I confess I should like to compare them. There are some on show down in that conservatory there—h’m?’

‘We can find out by looking,’ said Boyle, offering her his arm, more as if in duty bound than with any apparent pleasure.

‘Oh yes, they are lovely, lovely,’ said Nan, moving from one delicate blossom to the other in a sort of rapture. ‘Better than ours, after all ;’ she seemed lost in admiration of them, but suddenly, in the very midst of a burst of praise, turned to him.

‘Why will you not be friends with me ?’ said she, with such seeming artlessness, yet with such startling abruptness, that Ffrench lost his balance.

‘Friend—your friend,’ said he, stammering, his dark eyes suddenly aglow. Then, recovering himself somewhat, ‘What have I done that you should thus accuse me ?’ said he, with a forced smile.

‘Ah, now, Boyle !’ said she, in the little coaxing way that I suppose was born with her. It was a vague but eloquent protest. ‘You used to be my friend’—softly, throwing a little plaintive note into her voice.

‘More than that, I think,’ said Ffrench slowly, his dark moody eyes fixed upon the tessellated pavement.

‘Yes. Well—perhaps,’ said she brightly, as if it really was of little moment. ‘But that is all over now.’

‘Yes, of course,’ returned he.

‘What has grieved me,’ said Nan, very gently, ‘is your coldness. It’—hurriedly—‘it was not my fault, you know, and I can’t bear to think that you regard me—sideways, as it were.’

‘It was not your fault?’ repeated he, lifting his eyes now and searching hers eagerly. ‘You say that?’

‘Oh, don’t let us go into things,’ protested Nan, a little angry with herself for this touching on the borders of dangerous ground. ‘What does it matter? All I want to know is that you are my friend once more.’

‘Is that your wish?’ asked he. ‘That I should be your friend—that we should bury the past? Is that your desire?’

There was a suppressed vehemence in his manner that did not escape her, but was placed by her to the account of the ill-temper that, as a rule, distinguished him.

‘Have I not said so?’ rejoined she lightly. ‘You know what a coward I am—how I dislike being in anyone’s black books! There,’ holding out her hand to him, ‘a truce, I beg of you.’

‘A lasting peace, rather,’ said he, smiling in return, and pressing his lips to her hand.

After that they had fallen into very ordinary converse, carefully engineered by Nan. Leaning back upon a couch, with the nodding heads of the chrysanthemums above her, she had looked like a picture set in a flowery frame. She was dressed in black that night—an exquisite gown of lace, soft and clinging, with bunches of the lemon-coloured Devonshire tag caught here and there amongst its folds, and with some diamonds glittering in her nut-brown hair. There was a suspicion of triumph about her laughing lips, and her eyes burned brightly.

Yet Ffrench kept his head. No word of the passion that was consuming him passed his mouth. But the spirit of it entered into him, and made him for the time almost brilliant. An hour went by before Nan woke to the fact that she had been some time absent from the drawing-room, an hour during which every word that was said between her and Boyle might have been published in the market-place without prejudice to either of them—but still an hour.

There was a little subdued talk about it between



one or two in the reception-rooms outside. That old attachment between Miss Delaney and French was vaguely hinted at. There was a smile on an ottoman over there ; a glance of virtuous regret in the corner here. It was well 'understood of the people,' likewise, that Mrs. Hume had taken her present name with great reluctance. The lengthened *tête-à-tête* in the conservatory was probably the result of both these bits of gossip.

Mrs. Manly was one of the guests. Hearing something of the idle, hardly unkindly, surmisings going on around her, she rose from her place and sought Hume, who was standing somewhat apart examining some Italian views through a strong lens ; Julia, touching him lightly on the shoulder, brought him back from Florence to Ireland in a second—the shortest journey on record.

'Have you seen the chrysanthemums?' asked she, with all the graceful tact that, as a rule, characterized her.

Hume stared at her for a moment. No doubt his rapid transition from the south to the north—from one train of thought to another—had muddled his brain.

‘Yes,’ said he at last coldly.

‘You would like to see them again?’ suggested Julia, with distinct meaning this time. Hume stared harder.

‘No!’ he said. ‘They are specially fine, I grant you; but I have the bad taste to be careless about a second view of them.’

‘Careless, indeed!’ said Julia tartly. ‘If I were you I should make it my business to go and see them.’

‘If by “them,” you mean Nan and her cousin,’ says he directly, ‘you must forgive me for calling your hint unnecessary. Ffrench has seemed to me unhappy of late; I hope Nan will be able to bring him to a sounder state of mind.’

‘I am to understand that you approve?’ said Mrs. Manly, breathless with indignation.

‘You may always understand that I approve of everything my wife does,’ returned he, with a calm smile.

Julia left him in high dudgeon, and partly baffled. At heart, if selfish, she was at least sincerely attached to her nieces, and was now extremely anxious that

Nan's successful flight into the higher stratum of society should be unmarred by blot of any kind. There was a great deal of selfishness in this, too, as an aunt may make good capital out of a niece's position in life ; but *au fond*, as I have said, she was fond of the Delaney girls. She, therefore, to herself, denounced Mr. Hume's apparent unconcern at Nan's open encouragement of a man who had once been her lover as a piece of unpardonable negligence.

Hume, however, was very far from being as unconcerned as she believed him. A faint doubt, always in his mind, had that night become a certainty. Nan he honestly exonerated from any wilful desire to continue a flirtation contracted before her marriage, but he read her sufficiently well to know that she would go considerably out of her way to reinstate herself in the good opinion of anyone who had once regarded her as above the common. This craving for love or liking from others, this desire to be thought well of by all, was part of her nature, and is, indeed, as one will know who has studied the matter, an innate desire with all Irish people.

Whether this characteristic arises from a natural loveliness of disposition, or pride, or self-conceit, let who will decide.

He was not insensible to the delicate glances and subdued smiles going on around him. Those perfect views of Italy were as so many blank walls to him. He was, indeed, annoyed, and hurt almost beyond bearing, but he showed nothing of it. It was growing towards the time when all should make their adieu to the hostess, and yet Nan made no sign.

In truth, she had forgotten everything. She was enjoying herself immensely in her new relations with her old friend. To her merry, loving nature it was delightful to be at peace once more with one whom she had always liked, and with whom, perhaps, she had not been quite honest. He had truly loved her in his own queer way, and she—well, she certainly had never gone so far as to tell him that she never loved him.

The moments passed quickly ; he was thoroughly entertaining. She might, indeed, have been the last to bid Mrs. White ‘good-night,’ but for one trivial

circumstance. It was small, but it wakened her to a faint sense of the situation.

Attracted by a pale pink blossom that hung over her head—a little behind her and French—she had raised her bare arm, snowy as a cloud in June, and attempted to reach it. It was beyond her, and she had swayed slightly, bringing herself involuntarily almost within the circle of Boyle's embrace. He had caught her arm, and held it. It was only for a moment.

'Nan!' said he breathlessly.

It was, indeed, a mere breath, but so impassioned that she shrank from him sharply. Her movement recalled him to himself, and when she looked at him again he was to all appearance as cool as she could desire.

'I feared you had overbalanced yourself,' said he carelessly ; his voice was perfectly calm.

'Very nearly,' said she. 'That blossom tempted me, but it was beyond my reach.'

'So many things are beyond one's reach,' said he. He kept up the conversation almost alone after that, beyond a casual 'Yes' or 'No' from her. An un-

pleasant doubt of his sincerity as a mere friend had entered into her for the time being only ; it faded after that. Did he really like Penelope, or were his attentions to her only a veil for——? It was an unpleasant question, and she cast it from her. Yet in some occult way she knew that it would return again.

Almost immediately afterwards she rose and led the way back to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Manly, who was near the entrance-door, gave her a distinct scowl. Many had gone, but the rooms could hardly be called empty. Hume received her with a smile. She said a word or two to Mrs. White, and drove home with him beneath the frosty stars.

## CHAPTER XIX.

‘ If you’ve nothing, dear, to tell me,  
    Why, each morning passing by,  
With your sudden smiles compel me  
To adore you, then repel me,  
    Pretty little neighbour, why ?  
Why, if you have naught to tell me,  
    Do you so my patience try ?’

A CLATTER of cups and saucers ; a tinkling of silver spoons ; the subdued hissing of a tiny silver urn ; above these the soft murmuring of voices, with here and there a ringing laugh. Two glorious fires, one at either end of the picture-gallery, cast a rich light along the polished boards, and throw out the dusky tints of the portraits of many a dead and gone Hume now frowning or simpering, in armour or lace and velvets, from the walls. Rugs from all countries, and Persian prayer-mats, are flung wholesale upon the

ground ; tall screens cut off all possible draughts, and early spring blossoms, daffodils, snowdrops, hyacinths, and jonquils, make sweet the air, although it yet wants a day or two to Christmas.

Nan, in a very special tea-gown, is presiding over one small table, dropping sugar into the Sèvres cups ; Lady Despard, who arrived last night, is pouring out tea at another ; Penelope, in a dull red serge that makes her fair hair fairer, is talking to one of the officers from the barracks at Clonbree, who have in a body dropped in, this being Mrs. Hume's 'at home' day. In a distant corner a young man is lounging on a bearskin rug, making an abominable noise with a banjo.

A good many of the country people have dropped in, too, and as there is a large house-party at Hume, the gallery looks deliciously warm and comfortable and full.

'Is that called music in Ireland?' asks Lady Despard, alluding to the performance on the banjo.

'By some people,' says Hume, alluding to the performer.



‘It is always well to know things,’ says Lady Despard.

‘Peter is blessed with an artistic soul,’ says Nan.  
‘Peter, come here.’

The Hon. Peter Blake, thus adjured, rises to his feet, and having carefully and solemnly deposited his beloved instrument on the knees of the young lady nearest to him, who looks a little afraid of it—as in truth she well might be—comes swinging up to Nan.

He is a tall young man, most irregularly made, with limbs that were evidently meant for somebody else, and given to him by mistake. This naturally accounts for his awkward use of them. As he walks, every bone in his body seems disjointed, and one can only feel, after seeing him run, that it is Providence alone that has kept him together. His hair is inclined—generously inclined—towards the hue of the rosy morn, and it has acquired a trick of sticking up very straight all over his head. His eyes are a light blue, and are distinguished by an undying twinkle. He has no brogue at all that you could actually fix upon and place, yet it would be impossible for even a

dull person to converse with him for even five minutes and not know he was one of the sons of Erin. His ears make themselves felt ; his mouth is as large as his heart ; his boots and gloves have to be specially designed for him—of so goodly a growth are the inhabitants thereof. Taking him altogether, indeed, Peter is not pretty.

Yet many a handsome man might envy him his popularity with the other sex. Of no appreciable age, he is so far a boy at heart that no one would dream of taking him seriously, or consider him a fit subject for *une grande passion*. Perhaps there is a charm in this sort of nature—a sense of freedom from danger ; at all events, Peter Blake is an acknowledged favourite wherever he goes, both with men and women. Matrons and maids alike hail his advent with pleasure ; muslin and velvet skirts impartially are pulled aside to make room for him as he draws near. For Peter has received from nature one great and rare gift—the knowledge of how to be ‘all things to all women.’

There is one other thing about him that stands to his credit. Flirt he may with impunity ; for the

idlest person born could not connect his name with a scandal. 'He is not that sort of person,' as Lady Despard said, who knew him pretty well in London.

'You called me,' says he to Nan, dropping on to a tiny milking-stool at her elbow.

'Oh, get up! you'll break it!' says Mrs. Hume; 'and your precious bones, which would be much worse. No—yes. It was I who called you, certainly; but it is Lady Despard who wants you. She wishes to congratulate you on your mastery over that remarkable instrument you have just dropped into Miss Massey's lap.'

'So good of you,' says Mr. Blake, looking at Lady Despard with an eye full of glowing gratitude. 'To have pleased you is indeed—— Shall I do it again? It is a poor thing, but mine own. A mere trifle, a sigh from my soul, as it were. Shall I repeat it?'

'On no account. Not for worlds!' says Lady Despard. 'Your own, you say? Let it continue so, I entreat you. Don't give it to the common ones of the earth. Such priceless gems should be——'

'Kept warm?' suggests Mr. Blake. 'So I thought. That's why I've given my banjo into the care of Miss

Massey. After all, the lovely melody lives in it. Her name is Rosa, too. I could have wished it had been Dinah; but in this world we must resign ourselves to small crosses of this sort.'

Lady Despard smiles, as if in protest. Nan laughs outright. Miss Massey is one of the fleshy ones of the earth, and is now distinctly overpowered by the heat of the scented room.

'You're a bad boy,' says Nan. 'But as Lady Despard is so delighted with your talent'—with a little malicious grimace—'I tell you what, I'll give you a prominent part in the band for my ball that is coming off next week—Christmas week.'

'You're too good,' says Mr. Blake modestly. 'I fear I and my little banjo would only be out of place amongst your grand surroundings. But if we can be of any use to you, we——' He pauses as if overcome.

'Peter!' says Mrs. Hume indignantly. 'The idea of your thinking I was in earnest! Keep that banjo of yours out of my way, I advise you, or else I'll certainly smash it.'

'The gods forbid!' says Mr. Blake piously.

‘I do hope it will be a success,’ says Nan, gaily if irrelevantly addressing her guests generally. ‘Dances in the country are so often a failure. People, silly people, talk of love; but in my opinion it is “men, men, men, that make the world go round,” especially in a ballroom. And men, as a rule, are scarce. I depend on you all to help me. Bring your brothers and your cousins and your uncles if you can.’

Of course everybody says they are sure the dance in question will be a triumph of its kind. ‘Mrs. Hume being hostess, it must of necessity,’ etc., etc.

‘A word to you, Peter,’ says she, turning to Mr. Blake. ‘I know how susceptible you are. Steel your heart, then, against the 29th. You will find on that night two or three very pretty women here.’

‘Nothing strange in that,’ says he. ‘There is always one pretty woman here.’

‘If I am as pretty as that speech,’ says Nan, ‘I shall do very well. But I had Mrs. Dyson-Dwyer in my mind when I promised you beauty.’

‘I know her,’ says Mr. Blake, without enthusiasm.

‘So do I,’ said Lady Despard. ‘What a complexion! Most of society’s swans are geese. But

she is not. She is quite a swan all through. Lovely !'

'And rarer than most,' says Mrs. Manly. 'Black swans are scarce.'

'Now, do you really believe that ?' says Peter, with so innocent an expression that they all laugh, and the unkind turn the conversation has taken dies a sudden death.

Almost at this moment the curtains at the southern end of the gallery are drawn aside, and a young man turns the corner of the screen. The light is a little indistinct down there, and for awhile no one is sure of his identity, until a delighted exclamation from Nan enlightens them.

'Why, Boyle !' cries she. Her face, lovely, radiant, beams a thousand welcomes. She stands smiling on him, with a dainty Queen Anne teapot poised in mid-air, and a repoussé sugar-tongs in the other hand. It is plain to everybody that she is charmed by this unexpected coming of his.

'Is it really you ?' says she, hastily putting down the teapot, and extending to him eager, friendly fingers. 'What lucky star brought you here to-night ?'

A little irrepressible smile makes itself visible on the lips of the married women present. It is a hushed, subdued smile, and Hume, seeing it, grows inordinately angry—not with Nan so much as with her folly. Yet all through the anger is a certainty that the folly is the worst part of it, that the mischief is a mere surface matter, with no depth in it. The very openness of her welcome to Boyle precludes the idea of her friendship for him containing any element of danger.

‘You have come to stay, of course?’ goes on Nan, beaming brightly on the dark, sullen-looking young man, whose black eyes seem to burn into hers. ‘Oh yes, you must. Julia will spare you. Eh, Julia?’ Then, turning to her husband, ‘Tell him he must stay,’ says she.

‘I tell you you must stay,’ says Hume to Boyle, in a wonderfully pleasant manner, considering all things.

‘You have hardly come prepared, Boyle, have you?’ says Mrs. Manly, in her rather shrill voice, now shriller than usual. ‘You have left your things at Ballybrack, I suppose, on your way from the station. I don’t see how you——’

‘That is a thing of nothing,’ says Hume. ‘You,’ politely to Boyle, ‘will permit me to send to Ballybrack?’

‘Thank you,’ says Ffrench coldly.

A touch of awkwardness is beginning to make itself felt; a pause hardly to be accounted for ensues on Ffrench’s unfriendly tone, with which those immediately round him hardly know what to do. Penelope is growing nervous, when mercifully one of the children—Henjy—comes to the rescue. Scrambling up into Mr. Blake’s lap, he lays violent hands on his chain.

‘Peter—Peter—show me your watch,’ says he in a piercing treble. Truly children, if ofttimes imps, are sometimes angels.

Mr. Blake, thus adjured, as in duty bound produces his watch.

‘Henjy,’ says Penelope, glad of an excuse to break the absurd silence—born, as it would seem, of really nothing—and remorselessly making a victim of her small brother, ‘little boys like you should not speak so familiarly to grown-up people.’



This awful mandate so upsets Mr. Blake that he nearly lets Henjy fall.

‘Good heavens!’ says he, and no more.

Henjy, heedful of the reprimand, but not understanding the nature of it, stares open-eyed at Penelope, who, undaunted, continues the attack.

‘You should not call him “Peter,”’ says she, nodding her head to enforce her meaning.

Henjy, vaguely, ‘Why?’

Penelope, lamely conscious that she has now drawn upon her the eyes of Europe, ‘Because you mustn’t.’

Henjy, indignantly, ‘But that’s his name!’ General laughter, and a feeling on Penelope’s part that there is no way out of this difficulty. Meanwhile Mrs. Manly, who has by no means been turned from her righteous wrath by this diversion, has followed Hume into a curtained recess at the upper end of the room, where to his horror he finds himself imprisoned by her.

‘I wonder why you allow this to go on,’ begins she, without preface. ‘Why don’t you expostulate with her?’

‘About what?’ says he, trying vainly to temporise.

‘Nonsense! You know as well as I do. I don’t believe she cares a button for Boyle, but that goes for nothing. Her manner is abominably misleading, and there is more talk about her already than there should be.’

‘Or need be. I can quite believe that,’ says Hume, still calm.

‘Well, aren’t you going to do anything? What’s the good of a man if he can’t order people about? I’m sure Mr. Manly, when he was alive, would never have permitted me to—— But there is no use in going into it. It is your duty—your duty, mind—to put a stop to scandal before it goes too far.’

‘I think you are going too far,’ says Hume coldly, but still courteously.

‘I’m her aunt. I may be allowed to have a voice in the matter. A motherless girl, too, like that, and that ill-tempered, infatuated boy—why, I assure you——’

‘I must beg you,’ says Hume, who has grown rather white, and is now putting strong pressure

upon his temper, 'not to connect my wife's name with anyone!'

'Oh, that's all very fine!' says Mrs. Manly, who has borne throughout an undaunted front; 'but high talking like that won't prevent the world's tongue from wagging. If you could only hear all that I hear——'

'I am glad I can't,' interrupts Hume, with determination. 'The effect of this gossip on you is so disastrous that——'

'You can turn it off like that if you like,' cries Julia angrily. 'To ignore such matters is the easier way of meeting them no doubt, but is it one's duty? Answer me that. You call it magnanimity no doubt, but in reality it is folly, or worse. I could tell you of certain things that——'

'You shall tell me nothing,' says Hume sternly; 'not one word. I understand your niece thoroughly; you do not understand her at all. As to your nephew, he,' haughtily, 'is in my opinion of small consequence.'

Moving abruptly away, he crosses the gallery to where Nan is standing, and asks for a cup of tea.

## CHAPTER XX.

‘ Oh, if my love offended me,  
And we had words together.’

‘ WHERE’S Nan ?’ asks somebody.

It is twelve o’clock next day, and the snow is falling with such a persistent determination to spend the rest of its life at it, that the men perforce have given up their warfare on the birds, and have sorrowfully made up their minds to remain indoors. Some trifling difficulty about the arrangements for the evening’s amusement has arisen, and suddenly everyone becomes conscious that the hostess—of all people—is not here to be badgered and worried and drawn.

A little hasty glance round assures Lady Despard (who naturally has her brother’s welfare very much at heart) that whoever Nan may be with, it is not

Boyle Ffrench ; that young man being distinguishable, even at a distance, by the scowl that adorns his brow.

‘ I dare say she is in the billiard-room,’ says Hume. ‘ I think I heard Blake challenging her to a game half an hour ago.’

With one accord they all rise and suggest an adjournment to that free-and-easy region. After all, on an impossible day like this, what is so good as billiards ? Miss Leslie, who is staying at Hume, and who fancies Ffrench, hopes vaguely that Nan has won her game.

Such as it is, she has indeed won it ! But what a game ! Old Mrs. Leslie, who is the first to enter the library, stands back breathless, trying hard to cover the confusion that should be hers. Nothing comes of this modest effort, however, save a severe trampling on the pet corn of the person behind her, and presently all are in full view of the animated entertainment Nan has provided for them.

The billiard-table is in the centre of the room, and round and round it Nan is flying, closely pursued by Mr. Blake. So intent are these two on their race,

and so nobly bent on the accomplishment of it, that the entrance of a dozen people or so checks their ardour no whit.

‘Wait a second! ’Twill be over in a moment,’ gasps Nan, waving one hand to them as she flies past, her skirts generously tucked up, her chin in air, her whole face full of a determination to do or die.

The first astonishment at an end, it is impossible not to see laughter in the situation. Everyone gives way to mirth more or less, and, indeed, the whole matter might have ended harmlessly and afterwards have been regarded as an escapade, harmless positively, if wanting in dignity, but for an unfortunate turn given to it by Ffrench.

He alone has regarded this gallant contest with an unkindly eye. And now, through the merry laughter of the others rings a sharp exclamation, ending in a profane one that startles all present. Instinctively everybody turns in its direction, to see Boyle, ghastly rigid, his dark face livid, his eyes flashing. He has forgotten everything, even decency, and a savage rage shows itself in his expression as his gaze rests on the unconscious Peter.

There is something so near to murder in his face that involuntarily all the mirth dies ; a little shock has fallen upon everybody, and now a silence.

Bartle, who is standing next Ffrench, lays his hand violently, but with a savage pressure, upon his arm.

‘What the deuce are you thinking about?’ says he with such angry contempt that Ffrench pulls himself together, and tries to gain some command over his features. He shakes off Bartle’s hand angrily, and turns to Lady Despard, who receives him coldly.

At this instant comes a little triumphant cry from Nan.

‘Twenty!’ laughs she in a breathless fashion, stopping short, and laying one pretty hand upon her heart. ‘Six and a quarter, Peter. I told you I’d win.’

She has come to a standstill close to her husband, and leans against him as if for support. There is no more meaning in her thus accepting him as a prop than if he had been a chair, or a table, and yet a foolish unreasoning joy grows within his breast.

Lady Despard, looking coldly on, allows her a wisdom to which in truth poor Nan can lay no claim.

‘He said he could beat me in twenty runs round that,’ explains Nan, pointing to the billiard-table, and lifting a glowing, lovely face to Hume. It is one of her good, capricious moods with him. ‘But he wasn’t in it. He tried his best, and couldn’t catch me. Peter, my child, you will have to go on prison fare before you can hope to overtake me.’

‘It was falling over that chair over there that did for me,’ says Mr. Blake. ‘Only for it I should have beaten you into a cocked-hat.’

‘Oh, I like that!’ says Mrs. Hume, with some indignation. ‘Why, I fell over the ottoman, and what harm did that do me? But, my good Peter, you are too fat. That’s where it is.’

The recriminations are not only so loud, but so deep, that Lady Despard takes it on herself to put an end to them. Good gracious, what a girl for a well-regulated man to take to wife! If Hume had looked angry she might have felt comforted, but he looks so hopelessly impassive. Does he see? Does he feel nothing?



That he sees and feels everything is shown later, but only to that hardened criminal, his wife. Aware of a custom of hers, that takes her half an hour before luncheon into her own private den (an exquisitely arranged little nest in the southern wing, designed for her by Hume himself), with the understood purpose of writing letters, he follows her there, and having knocked at her door, and been given permission to enter, opens it and then closes it firmly behind him.

It is a charming room, and being a corner one has two bow-windows, one facing south, the other west. From the southern window a full view of the Castle can be had, the water now frozen over and glittering beneath the sun's rays. Heavy Eastern curtains, bright with golden thread, exclude every draught, and a brilliant fire of scented pine-logs roars merrily up the chimney. Soft cushions of Indian silk, gorgeous in hue, are thrown carelessly about, and priceless statuettes, and delicate jars and vases of oriental workmanship, stand on cabinets and tables.

A large fan is lying on Nan's knees; it falls to the ground with a little crash as she rises to receive Hume. There is surprise in her eyes, but there is

something deeper in his; a steady determination that startles her. It is a sort of 'now or never' look, she tells herself, with a rather nervous shrug.

'Oh, I didn't think it was you,' says she, with that fatal impulsiveness that belongs to her.

'Or perhaps you would have denied me entrance,' says he, with a rather grim smile. 'Now I am here, I hope you will try to endure me for a few minutes.'

'You have come to scold me,' says Nan with prophetic certainty. 'Do it quickly and get it over.'

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## CHAPTER XXI.

‘The flowers have unfolded their leaves,  
Wakens the rose at my feet ;  
Thou art a fresh budding rose,  
Why art thou sleeping, my sweet ?  
Wake then, O darling, with earth’s fairest things,  
List to thy lover who watches and sings.’

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‘ONE scolds a child !’ says Hume, gazing earnestly at her. ‘You are no longer a child. It is to induce you to bear that fact in mind that I am now here.’

‘It’s very good of you,’ says Mrs. Hume, sinking back in her chair, and preparing herself for all things. ‘You can call me an old woman if you like. I don’t mind.’

‘I must request you will not receive what I have to say to you in this spirit,’ says Hume angrily. He is sore at heart, and feels hardly so lenient towards her

peccadilloes as usual. 'Do you suppose it is a dignified thing for the woman of a house to be caught running round a table with a young man after her by her guests? It was the act of a tomboy. I wouldn't have believed it of you.'

'I'm not a tomboy,' reddening furiously. 'No one ever called me that before; and you shan't. As for the crime of running round a table—where does it lie? It isn't mentioned in the Ten Commandments, at all events. If you and your sister are too old to run about, I'm not; and I'm not going to be either'—defiantly—'for ages and ages!'

'You are talking folly purposely. Running about, as you call it, is nothing, but to have your name in everyone's mouth is another thing. I won't have it!'

'Well, don't,' says Mrs. Hume. She has pulled a straw out of a Japanese basket near her, and is now nibbling it with an apparent unconcern that maddens him.

'You don't care!' says he fiercely. •

'Not that,' says she, holding out to him in her dainty fingers the offending straw.

Hume, with a suppressed exclamation, quits the hearthrug and goes to the window. Whatever amount of passion drove him thither he learns to suppress, though not to kill, and presently comes back again, colder if not kinder.

‘You go too far,’ says he stiffly. ‘You are difficult to argue with, but I hope you will be good enough to remember that you are my wife.’

‘Why should I?’ demands she, rising to her feet, and regarding him with the flashing eyes of a child incensed by injustice. ‘I don’t see that at all. I don’t feel a bit like your wife. If you choose to have some words read over me to please yourself and my uncle, that is no reason why I should regard you as my husband. And I don’t, anyway!’ concludes Mrs. Hume, with an emphatic nod.

This seems conclusive. Hume, silenced, he hardly knows why, stands staring into the fire, trying to frame a sentence that will reduce her to reason. All to no purpose. The right line of argument escapes him, and he can think only of her charming, mocking face, and the sound of the voice that has defied him.

‘Why don’t you go on?’ asks Nan suddenly. ‘Why don’t you accuse me of flirting with Peter? That’s what you came to say.’

‘Did you think that?’ turning eagerly towards her. ‘You were wrong, then. Peter Blake! No. He is not to be connected with that sort of thing. He is nothing more than an overgrown boy, and will never be a day older. Peter has nothing to do with it. But——’ He checks himself abruptly, pausing as if to control the vehemence that threatens to master him. ‘It is this,’ he says presently, his tone slow and careful, ‘your friendship with your cousin—with Ffrench—is compromising you. Now’—hastily, seeing her about to speak—‘don’t mistake me. I know you don’t care a fig about him, but that you encourage him is beyond doubt.’

‘Encourage!’ wrathfully.

‘Certainly you do,’ steadily, and interrupting her with determination. ‘To any other man, the kindness you show him would be accounted just at its worth, but to a man so hopelessly in love with you as that—that idiot is, it——’

‘He is not in love with me!’ says Nan, indignant.

‘You know nothing about it. Why, if you knew all——’

‘I know quite enough,’ stiffly. ‘I wish to hear no more. In my opinion, he cares for you more than you know, and that fact will tell against you. For him, I care nothing; for you, I care everything. This morning, when we came into the billiard-room——’ He breaks off as if unable to proceed, as if memory is too much for him.

‘You should have seen his face,’ he says presently, with sudden violence. ‘That would have enlightened you. All saw it. His censure of your conduct; his censure! What the ——,’ with a sudden loosening of his wrath, ‘did he mean by looking at you like that?’

‘Like what?’ In spite of herself, Nan is a little carried away by his passion.

‘As if,’ choking, ‘he had some claim to you. As if he was jealous of you. What did he mean by that?’

‘How should I know?’ says Nan, growing calm all in a moment. ‘Who shall understand a man? Do you think you are more comprehensible than he is? Do you think you are not jealous? And both

of you about what?—a woman, who cares nothing for either of you ! Oh ! of all three am not I the one to be pitied, to cry aloud, to make a noise?—yet I say nothing. You come here, you blame me, as though I were of all the Galileans the biggest sinner ; and yet, is it my fault ? And you are wrong, too, as I told you before. He cares nothing for me. You need not use bad language towards me on account of him.’

‘Listen to me,’ says Hume, with such authority in his tone that it keeps her silent for a moment. ‘The man is in love with you still. There can be no doubt about that. His face in the billiard-room just now betrayed him. Everyone noticed him.’

‘Did they?’ says Mrs. Hume, with a distinctly unpleasant intonation. ‘That shows how terribly they were at a loss for amusement. You should look to it, or you will have your house put upon the list of the impossibles. And, indeed, if poor Boyle looked at me as you are looking now, no wonder everybody was frightened.’

‘You put the question aside.’

‘No, I don’t. I court it rather. Now, what have you to say further?’



‘I had better say nothing. Still, as you ask it—give up your friendship with your cousin.’

‘Are you really serious?’ asks Nan, who seems on the point of giving way to mirth.

‘Certainly I am.’

‘What! turn my back on Boyle, who has been as intimate as a brother with us all our lives. Do you wish me to cut him publicly, or shall I write him a sternly virtuous note telling him you regard him as a dangerous rival? Come, which shall it be?’

‘I simply ask you to alter your demeanour to him.’

‘I could hardly do that without dragging down on my wretched shoulders even more of the world’s obloquy than already rests there, according to your account.’

‘You are quite capable of arranging this matter without creating any comment—if you choose.’

‘Well,’ rather insolently, ‘I don’t. By the way,’ turning her lovely flushed face more directly to his, ‘has it ever occurred to you how you flatter him? Is he really worth all this worry?’

‘No—but you are.’

‘Oh ! please, leave me out of it.’

‘What nonsense you talk ! Why, you are the whole of it. Do you suppose I care about his reputation ? Do try to be sensible, Nan, and give up this foolish affair.’

‘Is that a new name for him ?’ asks Mrs. Hume, with abominable frivolity. ‘Well, I don’t see what is to be gained by it.’

‘Your self-respect, for one thing.’

‘I don’t believe you know what you are saying,’ says she, reddening vividly. ‘My self-respect has nothing to do with it. Your absurd fancies—everything.’

‘I don’t agree with you.’

‘A superfluous remark. When do you agree with me ?’

‘Come to the point,’ says Hume, with extreme patience.

‘Well, I can’t,’ says Mrs. Hume, leaning back in her chair, and laying her slender finger-tips with the utmost care one against the other. ‘I never could come to the point in all my life. Something Irish, I suppose. Haven’t you said it all yet ? I’m tired ;

and your sister will be shocked if I'm late for luncheon.'

'Can't you answer me one way or the other?' says Hume, keeping his temper with difficulty.

'I thought we had argued it out to the bitter end. No? Well, that just proves what I have always said, that argument is an utterly useless thing. It annoys the many, and benefits only the very few. To give way to it is weak. You think one thing about Boyle, I think another. Let us give up the discussion, and shuffle the cards again.' Her whole air is not only aggressive, but flippant.

'You mean that you desire to change the conversation?'

'I mean only,' petulantly, 'that I am not going to be teased any longer.'

'If you refuse to discourage Captain Ffrench you give me leave to place my own interpretation upon your conduct,' says Hume, who has grown very pale.

'A stock phrase!' says Nan. 'One could hardly open any novel without finding it there, and we all know what it means—nothing!'

Hume, as if overcome by the storm now raging within him, goes up to her, and catching her arms just above the elbow, draws her towards him.

‘You forget that there is something due to me,’ he says unsteadily.

‘I forget nothing,’ says she, meeting his eyes without flinching.

‘Is my whole life to be wrecked?’ asks he passionately.

She shrugs her shoulders.

‘It is your own look-out,’ she says. ‘You would marry me, you know.’

Her revenge has been given into her hand, and by him, and she has taken it; but now something of a feeling of horror towards herself, something of remorse chills her blood. Surely she has taken a hateful part. To be angry with herself is to be angry with all the world. And Nan, who has grown suddenly miserable, because ashamed of herself, resents this unpleasant feeling, and pours out her resentment upon Hume.

‘Why do you force me to speak to you like this? Can you not let unhappy things rest? I have borne

a great deal from you, but to be accused of vulgar flirtation is more than any woman could submit to without temper. I am not a patient Griselda ; and you know it. And yet you come here, and are as bad and as cruel as ever you can be to me ; and when I say one horrid little word to you, in return for a thousand of yours to me, you are as indignant as though all the incivility was on my side.'

'I have said nothing,' says Hume.

'That's just it. That is what is so aggravating about you. You are calling me ungenerous in your own mind, but you won't say it ; you say nothing, but, like the parrot, you think the more. I hate all that sort of thing,' cries the lovely virago, shaking her head in withering protest, with her straight brows drawn up to where the nut-brown locks stray on her white forehead.

'I think I was perfectly reasonable.'

'Do you ? To accuse me of "encouraging"—that was the word—of encouraging Boyle—was that reasonable ? Well, I shall not submit to it. I shall let no one tell me that I behave badly.'

‘I never used such words,’ says Hume, a good deal shocked.

‘You implied it ; it is the same thing. You have been very cruel and unkind, and I shall go straight down and tell the girls all about it. They will not misjudge me.’

As she speaks she snatches up a hat and a fur dolman she had thrown on an ottoman a while since, and marches in determination towards the door.

‘If you go I shall accompany you,’ says Hume, with equal determination. ‘I shall see that you don’t misrepresent my conduct to Penelope. I feel sure she will see that there was justice in all I said as well as common-sense.’

‘I dare say you have poisoned her mind against me,’ angrily. ‘If you have’—with a little sob—‘if you have said one injurious word of me to Penelope, I——’

‘You know I have not,’ says Hume. ‘You know I would say no such word to anyone. Am I not here to defend you against the world—against yourself even—not to accuse?’

‘I want no defence,’ coldly.

She has her hand on the handle of the door, but, as if once again surprised and horrified by her own hardness, looks back at him.

‘I don’t know what has happened to me,’ she cries, large tears gathering in her eyes. ‘I used to be a nice girl—quite a nice, good-humoured girl,’ with pathetic self-pity, ‘and now I am nothing but a cross, unsympathetic woman. And it is all your fault. You have ruined my life.’

‘And what have you done to me?’ demands he, with such a depth of misery in face and voice that at last she softens.

She is still standing at the door, leaning against it, with eyes downcast, and slowly moving one foot backwards and, forwards. It would be impossible to describe the grace of the awkwardness she betrays.

Quite a minute passes by before the struggle within her comes to an end, and letting her hat drop to the floor, she holds out to him her hand—the slender, snowy, famous hand of the Delaneys, with its pointed finger-tips and perfect nails.

‘I will let you off about telling the girls, and I am

sorry if you are unhappy because of me,' says she, with a quick sigh. 'But, as I told you just now, it is not my fault ; you should remember that. I did not want to marry you.'

'Oh, why remind me of that every hour of the day?' says Hume, with sharp pain, ignoring the friendly hand, and leaving the room abruptly.

END OF VOL. II.



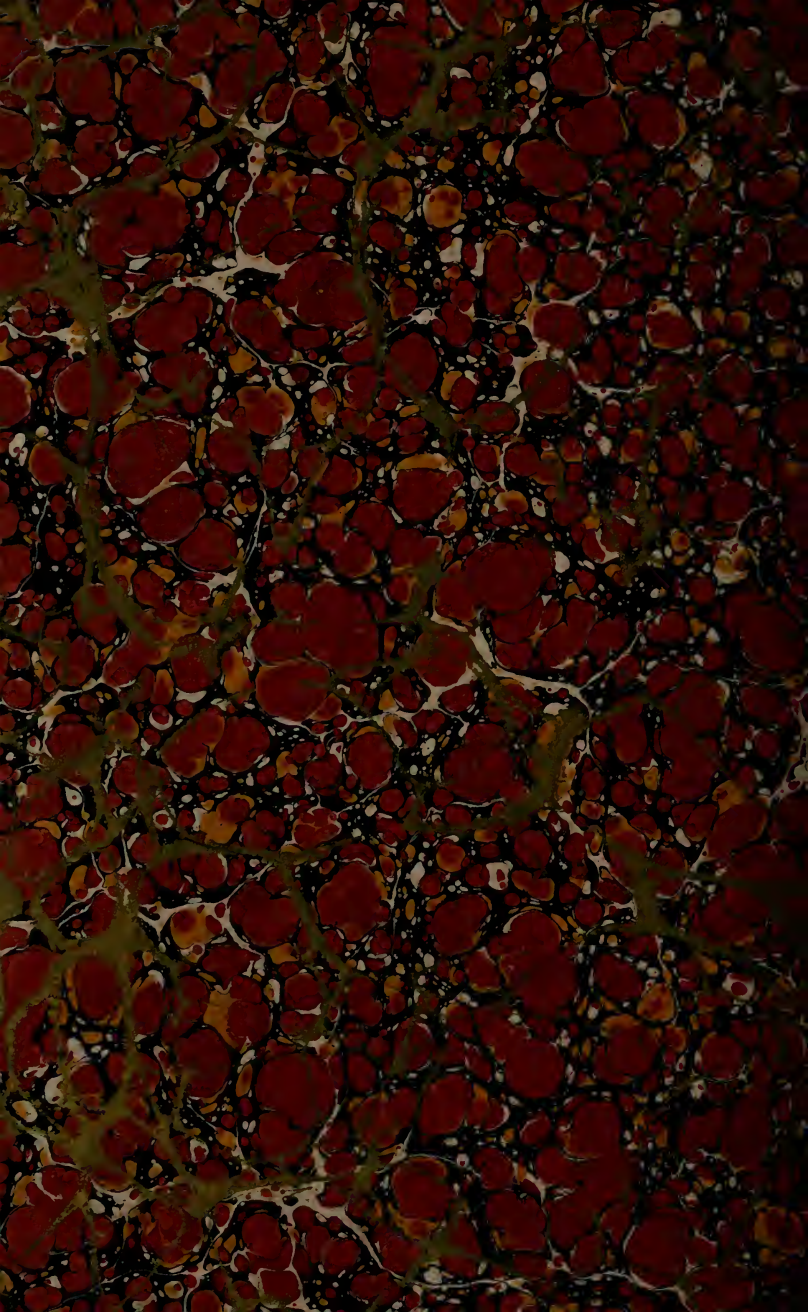


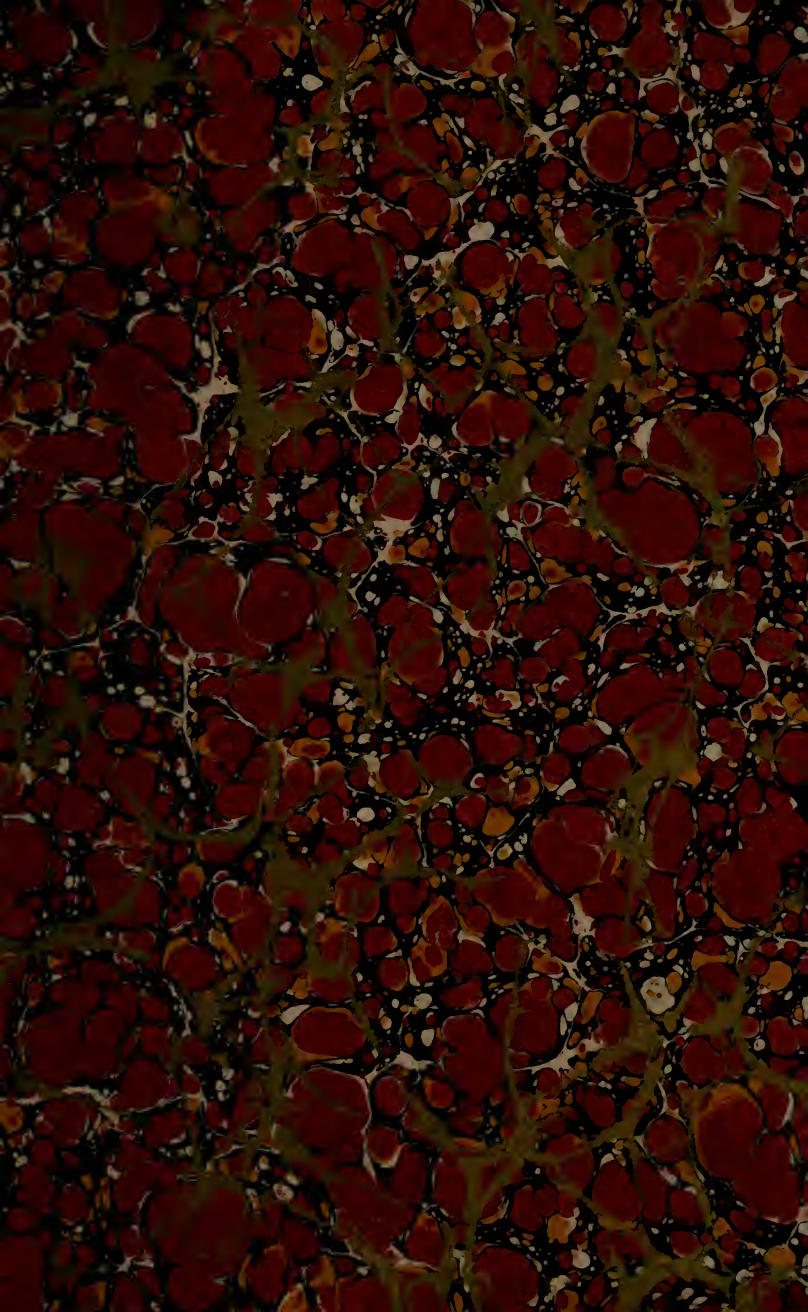






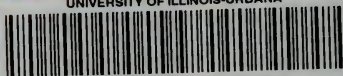








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